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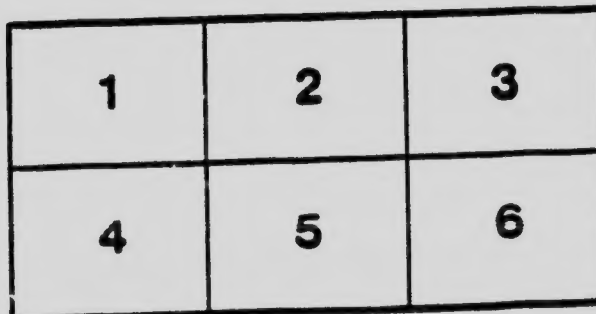
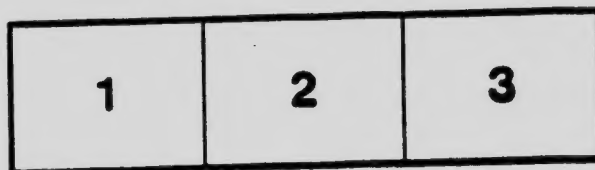
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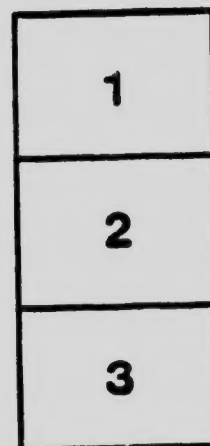
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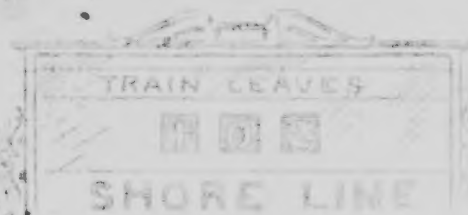
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Cupid En Route

Ralph
Henry
Barbour







NCG.

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1st Sun 24

J. B. McMillan



"THEN CAME A SLIGHT, ELDERLY LADY AND — YES — BESIDE HER TROTTED
THE ONE GIRL IN THE WORLD." Page 66

CUPID EN ROUTE

RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

Illustrations by F. Foster Lincoln
Decorations by Albert D. Blashfield



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*To
Friends Above the Border*





CUPID EN ROUTE

I

HERE, son!" Dave Fisher waved a big, scarred, scintillant hand and addressed the waiter in his mildest voice, which could be plainly heard at the other end of the dining room. "Get us some good *see-gars*; hear? Somethin' about thirty cents apiece; none o' your cheap stogies."

The waiter hurried away and Dave leaned back in his chair until it creaked, pulled down his waistcoat with a sigh of contentment and grinned across the table. He was a large man, tall, broad and thick-set, with a long neck that emerged bronzed and muscular from his collar and carried a head that would have been entirely out of place on a body under six-feet-three. It was broad



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across the cheek-bones and the jaw was square, and a pair of pale blue eyes twinkled from a face that was hued like a sheet of leatheroid. A long, drooping mustache hid his mouth and, like his hair, was of an indeterminate shade between white and yellow. Hair and mustache had been recently trimmed, but the barber's efforts had only increased the natural tendency of each to point all ways at once. He was attired in full evening garb, with a shirt-bosom that looked a yard wide, a swallow-tailed coat that drew protestingly across the huge shoulders and a waistcoat with the generous curve of the Washington Arch. Across this hung a heavy gold chain. His collar caused him constant uneasiness and his white lawn tie had loosened until it formed a rakish cross under his chin. In age he might have been anywhere between forty and fifty. As a matter of fact he was forty-six.

His companion at table was his junior by sixteen years, a tall, well-made, good-look-



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ing man who wore his dinner clothes as though, contrary to fact, he had appeared in them every night of his life. He was very boyish looking yet, in spite of the lines which told of eight years of labor and struggle and final achievement. Wade Forbes, like his companion, was tanned by sun and wind, and his hands, one of which held the check which the waiter had just presented, although well manicured, bore evidence of toil with pick and shovel, sledge and drill. His face, expressing at once resolution and good temper, was clean shaven, his hair was dark and a pair of calm and steady brown eyes answered his partner's smile.

"Dave, you're getting reckless," he said.

"Huh!" Dave gulped down an oath. "If I lived in this town I reckon I wouldn't have a red at the end of the month. It sure does appeal to your generous nature, Wade. Seems like I couldn't keep my hands out of my pockets here." He glanced about him over the crowded room; the hanging baskets of ferns, the leaf-hidden

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lights, the splashing fountain, the busy hurrying waiters. "Remember the Senat restarong at Telluride, Wade? This son o' reminds you of it, don't it? It's s different! Reckon all these gay dudes liv here, boy, or just come in for a good feed?"

"Just here for dinner, I guess, most o them. The quiet folks in the corners and at the side tables are guests of the hotel probably. The splashy ones are outsiders blowing in a week's salary."

"What? Ain't they all millionaires?" exclaimed Dave. "Gee, I was feelin' poor and humble, boy! Reckon that undersized galoot over there with the golden haired Venus ain't got no more'n I have Wade?"

"It's a safe bet," laughed Wade. "I dare say if it came to a show-down, Dave you'd outstack 'em all."

"Well, I'll be—" Dave swallowed it. "Think o' that! I thought they was all Rockefellers and Goulds and J. P. Morgans. Well, if that little two-by-twice dude ain't

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got any coin I don't see what a fine lookin' lady like she is wants with him." Dave stroked his mustache, and gazed admiringly across. "She's certainly a winner on looks, ain't she?" He caught Wade's look of amusement and answered it with a shake of his head. "New York ain't no proper place for a married man, partner. I been feelin' frisky ever since I lit out of that Pullman car this mornin'. Don't you go an' leave me alone here, boy. If you do I won't be answerin' for any consequences arisin' therefrom. What you got there?" This to the waiter who was displaying three open cigar boxes. "'Romeo and Juliet,' eh? That's a new one on me, son, but I reckon they're all right. I seen the play once and Juliet was all to the good. How much are they?"

"Forty cents, sir."

"Forty, eh? Didn't I tell you I wanted fifty-centers?"

"Those are all right, Dave," Wade interposed.

"Are they? Well, you know, partner."



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He picked out a handful and tossed them on the table. "Have some. How much, son?"

"Two dollars and eighty cents, sir. I'll bring a check."

"All right. Ain't anything more we got to eat, is there, Wade? 'Cause I certainly am feelin' kind o' discouraged."

"No, I guess we've done our duty, Dave. I suppose you'll want to go to the theatre, won't you?"

"Anything better in sight?"

"No, not unless you'd rather try opera," answered Wade with a smile.

"Opera? You mean grand opera that you read about? I never been to one of them. How are they, pretty—" Dave waved his cigar—"pretty tony?"

"About the limit on style, Dave."

"Well, there aint nothin' I ain't ready to go up against! Lead me to it! I'm feelin' sort o' rich and dizzy, boy, and I reckon I want the best there is."

Wade took up the evening paper and glanced over the amusement column.



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"Then I guess it's the Manhattan for ours, Dave. They're singing Herodiade there. It's Aida at the other house, and I guess Herodiade would suit you better."

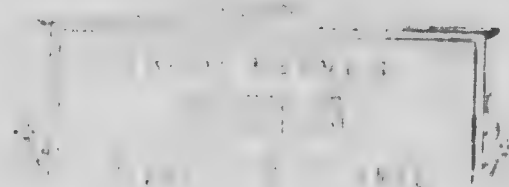
"Just as you say. I ain't never heard of either of 'em. How about this Eye-talian feller, Caruso? He doin' anything tonight?"

"Not tonight," Wade answered. "It's Cavalieri and Renaud at the Manhattan."

Dave blinked and waved his cigar acquiescently.

"Sounds all right, boy. I leave it to you. Just as long as there's plenty of style and ginger I'm for it. Pay your bill and let's get along. I ain't spent any money for 'most an hour and my roll's gettin' awful nervous!"





II



IN spite of the lateness of the hour they were fortunate and secured seats in the first row of the balcony just at the turn on the left. It was Dave's treat and he had been disappointed at not being allowed to pay more for the tickets than he had. "I always thought grand opera was about five dollars a throw," he said doubtfully. "You sure this is the real thing, partner?" When they had left the taxicab at the door Wade had suggested that the driver call back for them after the performance.



"That's so," agreed Dave. "Son, you come back here in a couple of hours and wait for me. You just let out a yell for Mr. Fisher and I'll get you." Then the carriage man slammed the door, said "Eleven-twenty" and thrust a card into Dave's

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hand. Wade explained the system of carriage calling, and Dave blocked the traffic for a minute while he looked up at the electric announcer. "Gee, ain't that cute?" he marvelled. "What they don't think of nowadays ain't much!"

The big, heavily-decorated house was well filled, and all save the upper rows of boxes held their quota of over—or under-dressed women, with here and there a dark coat marking the presence of a male escort. One gown, of flamingo red, caught Dave's fancy at once.

"Now there's what I call a real pretty dress, partner," he said in a hoarse whisper. "That's bang-up, ain't it. But, say, boy, ain't she a le-eetle bit old to be wearin' such bright colors?"

That the subject of Dave's remarks didn't overhear them was merely because she was at the other side of the house, for Dave's faintest and most confidential whispers had the soft and dulcet qualities pertaining to a mountain avalanche or a distant



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thunder storm. Those in his vicinity turned amused glances toward him and put their heads together; Wade heard the low hum of voices, the suppressed mirth. But the next instant he had forgotten them. In the nearest box, distant but a few yards, a girl had turned her face toward them. And such a face! Wade's heart sprang up in his throat—or so it seemed—turned over twice quite deliberately and went floating, sinking back into place, leaving him dazed and breathless. The girl's dark eyes—violet-blue they looked to Wade—rested a moment on Dave, while the faintest flicker of sympathetic amusement lighted them, and then passed on to his companion. For an instant, a blissful, heart-stirring instant, the blue eyes looked straight into Wade's, very straightly, calmly, impersonally. Then the girl's gaze wandered past him, hovered a moment and returned for just the smallest fraction of time ere she turned her face toward the stage again. But in that second glance there had been a faint interest, a



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vague question, and short as it was Wade had read it. What his own eyes conveyed he never knew. He took a long breath and came to himself to find Dave's voice rumbling in his ears.

"That's a hell of a big band," observed Dave.

Wade had purchased a libretto and now he thrust it into his friend's hands. "You'd better read the story of the first act," he said, "so you'll know what it is all about." He pointed out the English translation and Dave bent over it frowningly, his lips working as he read. Wade's eyes and thoughts went back to the girl in the box.

Her back was half toward him so that even by leaning forward he could catch but an imperfect view of her profile. But even so much made him glow and set his heart to thumping again. She was dressed in pale blue, and the soft, satiny gown followed closely every graceful line of the girlish form. Her neck was bare, and short sleeves terminating in silver fringe left the



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slim round arms to view. There was a double chain of pearls about the straight throat and the dark brown hair held a spray of silver leaves. Now and then a half turn of her head gave a fleeting glimpse of her face in profile, of soft cheek and arched brow, of a nose slightly aquiline, delicate, sensitive, a straight brow under the soft hair, a small, quiet mouth, and a chin that in spite of its soft curves held a certain tranquil strength. She sat erect as though her lithe body disdained the support of the chair-back and reminded Wade of a young queen on her throne. The rolled programme in her right hand took on the likeness of a scepter. Queen or commoner, she had one loyal subject that evening, for Wade's heart had confessed allegiance with that first meeting glance.

There were five women with her in the box, but save that one was elderly with silver-gray hair and that the rest were apparently matrons whose ages ran the gamut of the thirties and forties, Wade

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could have told nothing of them. And before his attention had a opportunity to reach them the house darkened and the big curtain rolled up on a red and green stage.

Dave didn't display much interest in things at first, even Salome's appearance on the scene leaving him unaffected. But when Herodias came on, Wade heard Dave's chair creak.

"She's some on looks, ain't she, boy?" he whispered. "What's the trouble with her? Someone been talkin' sassy?"

"S-sh," cautioned Wade. "You mustn't talk, Dave."

Dave settled back in his chair again and remained silent until John appeared. Then,

"Who's that yellow-whiskered galoot?" he inquired cautiously. Wade explained in whispers.

"John the Baptist? The feller in the Bible?" rumbled Dave in astonishment. "Well, were n't he a pill! But, say, he can sure sing some few, can't he? Looks like she was stuck on him, eh? Ain't that like

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a fool woman to pass up a King and get dippy about a Jack?"



When the curtain went down Dave had a good many questions to ask and Wade was kept busy answering them, but that didn't prevent him from keeping his eyes on the divinity in the box. He wondered how old she was. It was hard to decide that. She might be eighteen or she might be twenty-two. But the matter of age didn't engage his curiosity long. The problem to be solved was: Who was she? Where did she live? How was he to meet her? For know her he must and love her he would! Various schemes for obtaining the information he desired, came and were rejected. In the end the only thing to do, so far as he could see, was to find out her name, if possible, from someone in the house. He would ask the ushers first, and for that he must wait for the next intermission. The lights sank and the girl in the box became an indistinct figure, only the ivory of her face and neck and arms showing wanly in the purplish gloom.

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The act went on, a blaze of color, a riot of sound and movement, to its end. At the fall of the curtain Wade arose. "I want to speak to someone, Dave," he explained. Dave winked gravely and pulled himself out of his seat. "So do I," he said. They parted at the stairs and Wade sought the nearest usher. The box, he learned was the Pearse box and the subscriber herself was the little silver-haired lady in the steel gray satin. But the usher didn't know the young lady in light blue. Neither did the next usher, nor the next. But Wade was satisfied. They would give him the address of the box holder at the office and if need be, the little silver-haired lady must supply the rest of the information he desired. As an indication of his condition of mind—or heart—I may say that it didn't occur to him then that to apply to a total stranger for the name and address of a guest at the opera would be either *outré* or ridiculous. He rescued Dave and hurried back to his seat, fearful lest the girl should



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cast a glance in his direction and he not be there to intercept it. But apparently she had either never realized his existence or had promptly forgotten it, for not once did she turn her head. Dave was yawning frankly and looking at his big diamond-encrusted watch.

"It ain't awful lively, is it?" he asked. "Is it goin' to last much longer?"

"About an hour," Wade replied as the house darkened. Dave sighed.

"I reckon a good smart vawdervi... show was what I needed," he said.

The orchestra began the intermezzo and the audience hushed to silence. Wade, gazing in the mellow twilight at the girl in the box, experienced emotions that were as strange to him as they were sweet, and as sweet as they were sad. The strings tinkled and sobbed, and the wind instruments took up the theme and carried it softly on. And Wade's heart beat faster and faster under the triple spell of music and love and fragrance; for the air about

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him was laden with the sensuous, lemony odor of gardenias, and for months after the faintest whiff from one of those white blossoms made his pulses leap. When the last strain had died away the house burst into delighted applause and the leader waved his baton again. And at that moment the dim line of white that was Her face broadened to an ivory oval. She had turned and was looking in his direction! Whether her eyes were on him he didn't know, but for a full moment she gazed over her shoulder and Wade gazed hungrily back. Then slowly the face turned away again, and Wade wondered whether those beside him could hear his heart thumping.

Later they made their way with the throng down the stairs through the foyer and out into the cold frosty night. They had stopped at the check room for their coats and so reached the sidewalk in the midst of the confusion. Dave found his carriage check after much seeking, surrendered it and followed Wade to a position





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out of the way. Wade scanned the throng eagerly for sight of the girl, and presently his sight was rewarded. She came through the entrance in the van of her party, a long fur-trimmed wrap enveloping her. At that instant a ragged, liquor-soddened man pushed his way unsteadily toward her.

"What's yer number, lady? Give me yer number!"

Whether he stumbled on his own uncertain feet or tripped over someone else's doesn't matter. But with hand out-stretched for her carriage check he half fell against the girl and to save himself seized her arm. She drew back with a stifled cry and a look of loathing. Wade sprang forward, but Dave was ahead. With one hand he seized the man and sent him reeling into the street.

"Get out, you sneaking coyote!" he roared. And then, dropping his voice to a reassuring rumble: "It's all right, Miss, I reckon he didn't mean no harm, ma'am."

The girl's startled gaze encountered Dave dubiously until recognition came. Then,



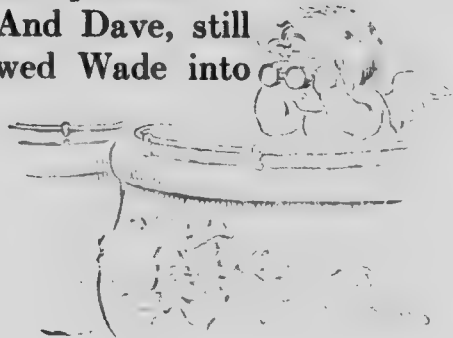
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"Thank you," she said with a smile. "It doesn't matter. He—rather startled me." Her gaze went past him to Wade, who, inwardly reviling Dave for his luck, stood at his shoulder. "Thank you," she repeated with a little inclination of her head, and the smile that accompanied seemed to include Wade. Then she passed on, the little silver-haired lady discharging questions with the rapidity of a gatling gun, and Wade, following her with his gaze, saw her swallowed up by an electric brougham. Dave, running a finger around inside his collar to ease the pressure, scowled about him.

"Where's that damned drunken galoot?" he growled.

"Gone," said Wade. "And we'd better go too. Here's our taxi."

"Think of him puttin' his dirty hands on a fine-lookin' gal like that, partner! I oughter rung his neck!" And Dave, still muttering his wrath, followed Wade into the cab.



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Wade was silent as they were jounced and rattled back toward the hotel. But Dave soon recovered his equanimity and talked for two.

"Did you see that gal, Wade?" he asked. "Wa'n't she a peach?"

"Yes," said Wade,

"She sure was, boy, they certainly do grow 'em good-lookin' in this town. I've seen—" He broke off abruptly and half sprang to his feet. "Jumpin'—Missed him, by God!" He sank back again. "Say, I wouldn't drive one o' these taximobiles for a fortune, Wade! I reckon, though, you'd get used to runnin' over folks after awhile. Reckon that feller out there 's got more nicks on his gun than the Apache Kid! Dare say he don't eat real hearty when he ain't killed a half-dozen women an' children. Whoa, you—Honest, partner, this gets on my nerves somethin' awful! The way he just don't hit 'em has me beat. He must have driv a fire-engine 'fore he got this thing. Why, say, boy, I was in a bucket

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once when it got loose and dropped twelve levels an' it weren't a shake to this; just what you might call mildly exhilaratin'! I'd hate like hell to get killed in the middle of New York City, boy; it wouldn't sound well back at Lone Mesa, would it? Folks 'd think I was drunk!"

He heaved a sigh of genuine relief when the cab pulled up with a final plunge in front of the hotel.

"Son," he said, as he paid the driver, "you're sure cheatin' yourself when you only ask eighty cents for that ride. There was eleven dollars' worth of excitement to it. There's a two-spot. You keep the change, son, it'll help pay your funeral expenses some day; and if it ain't mighty soon I miss my guess!"



III

DAVE had outfitted all the way across the continent, so to speak, adding to his wardrobe wherever they had stopped long enough for him to reach a store. The pajamas he had purchased in Chicago. They were of pale lavender with white fleur-de-lis sprinkled upon them, and, unfortunately, they were much too small. To see Dave lolling luxuriously in a crimson velvet arm-chair attired in lavender pajamas that threatened to give way every time he puffed at his big, black cigar gave the observer an excellent idea of what blonde Odin would have looked like had he lived today. The partners were occupying a suite of three rooms, and when Wade, his night attire chastely hidden by a dressing gown, joined Dave the latter gazed about the parlor with large satisfaction.

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"These are great quarters we've got here, boy," he said. "How much did you say they was costin' us?"

"Twenty-six a day," answered Wade, seating himself on a couch and drawing his glass toward him. "About thirty-two times what I used to pay for my room in Telluride, Dave."

"Times have changed, Wade. I never thought two years ago I'd ever be doin' this." He sighed luxuriously, stretched his long legs until the pajamas strained and waved his cigar in a gesture that included everything from the thick, red carpet to the bric-a-brac on the mantel.

"Neither did I," said Wade. "Not when I was pushing a shovel for three dollars a day."

"That's right. Funny the way things happen, ain't it? If you hadn't dropped that drunken greaser just when you did that night in Flannerty's it 'd been all up with me, I reckon." Dave chuckled, "I won't never forget the way he hit the wall; thought

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he was goin' clean through. I was some relieved, boy, for he had a fine drop on me an' my fingers was a good six inches from my gun."

"Yes, that was the start," mused Wade. "A couple of months after we started out prospecting."

"An' had mean luck all that summer. But we hit it at last, eh? Boy, the Better Days is goin' to be the biggest little producer in Colorado before long."

"I'm satisfied if she just keeps up her present gait," said Wade. "Are you really going back the day after tomorrow, old man?"

"I got to. Minnie wouldn't never forgive me if I was away Christmas, nor the kids neither. Sides, I got plenty to do out there. Even if I start back Saturday I won't much more'n make it, like as not. I see where they've had ten inches of snow around Denver, an' that means snow goin' through the mountains. I reckon, anyhow, another day of this town will be about all I can stand."

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"What's the matter? Don't you like it?" Wade laughed.

"Oh, I like it all right enough, but I don't feel to home here. It's different with you, I reckon; you was born around here an' you savvy the landmarks. It's strange country to me an' I don't speak the langwidge. I wish you was goin' back with me, partner."

"I guess you'll get along all right. I'll put you in a car here that 'll take you right through to Chicago."

"That's all right; I know the back-trail, boy. I was just thinkin' that it's goin' to be powerful lonesome out there this winter."

"Well, I may be back before you get a chance to miss me, Dave. It all depends. After all, there isn't much to hold me here nowadays. When my folks were alive it was different. I dare say a month or two will be all I'll want."

"Reckon I'd better put on another shift at the mine," said Dave with a twinkle in his eyes. "Reckon if you're goin' to stay two months here you'll need a pile of money."





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"I guess I'll have enough to scrape through with," laughed the other. "I'll find cheaper lodgings after you go, old man." He was silent a moment. Dave poured himself another drink and worked the syphon. "Dave, did you ever think of living in Denver?"

"Sure, lots o' times. But Minnie always 'lows Telluride's good enough for her, an' she's boss, you know. Why, boy?"

"Well, I've been thinking of it myself. After we get things running smooth at the mine I don't see why I couldn't, why we both couldn't, Dave; that is, if Minnie changed her mind."

"Course we could! You could, anyway. Minnie aint' much at changin' her mind as *you* know. Reckon you'll buy a smashin' big house on Capitol Hill an' make them city folks sit up an' take notice?"

"Y-yes, I dare say. The fact is—" Wade paused and knocked the ashes from his pipe. "The fact is, Dave, I'm thinking of getting married" Dave's glass went down with a bang.

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"The hell you say!"

Wade nodded.

"Why, boy, you ain't never said nothin' about that! Didn't know as you savvied a woman when you see one!"

"Well, I guess it's time, Dave. I'm thirty years old and I guess I've got enough now to keep a wife on."

"Reckon you have," chuckled Dave. "Have you spotted the lady, boy?"

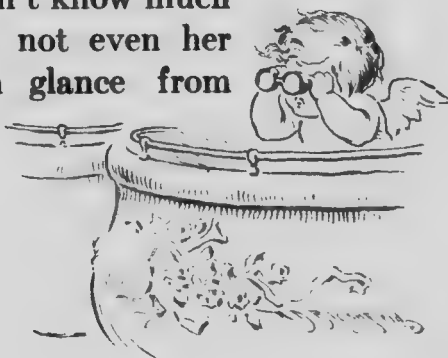
"Yes."

"You have? Well, say, you keep a pretty close mouth, you do! Why, I never seen you takin' notice none. 'Tain't Hutchins's gal, is it?"

"No, it's not Hutchins's girl, Dave. She lives here in New York; at least, I suppose she does."

"Jumpin' Jehosophat! Don't you *know* where she lives?" asked Dave bewilderedly.

"No. Fact is, Dave, I don't know much of anything about her yet; not even her name." Dave cast a keen glance from





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Wade to his glass and from the glass to the bottle.

"Are you feelin' right well, Wade?" he asked solicitously. "Ain't feverish, are you?"

"A little, Dave." Wade arose and began to walk restlessly about the room.

"You better see a doctor. I reckon they have doctors here, don't they?" Dave was plainly anxious and worried.

"A doctor wouldn't help, old man," said Wade with a rueful smile. "I'm head over heels in love, Dave; that's what's the matter with me. And I guess it's worse for being so sudden."

"Sudden?" echoed the other.

"Yes, darned sudden, old man. It happened at about a quarter past eight and it's been getting rapidly worse ever since. Look here, remember that girl in front of the Opera House? The one that loafer fell into?"

"Sure! What about her?"

"Well, she's—she's It, Dave."



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"You mean—you've gone an' fallen—"

"Fallen with a thump, old man. That's the girl I'm going to marry, the Lord willing."

"Phew!" Dave tossed his cigar away and felt for another. Not finding one in his pajamas he let his hand fall and looked helplessly at his friend. "You mean to tell me, boy, that you're in love with that girl?"

"I sure am!"

"An'—an' you don't know her? Not even her name?"

"No, I never saw her until tonight."

"Then—then—why, damn it, Wade, you can't go to a theatre an' pick out the prettiest gal there an'—an' marry her!"

"Why can't I?" asked Wade calmly.

"Why—because—how do you know she'll have you?"

"Why not? I'm all right, ain't I? I'm not deformed and I'm average good-looking and I've got plenty of money. My family's as good as there is in New York State and we've none of us been hanged. I don't say



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she will take me, Dave, but she's sure going to have the chance!"

"Well, I'll be—" Dave gulped and looked at his partner in wondering admiration. "Wade, you're sure a wonder! Do you—do you mean it?"

"I never meant anything any more," replied Wade quietly as he refilled his pipe. "I'm going to find out who she is, where she lives. Then I'm going to get acquainted with her and convince her that I'm the chap she wants."

"Sounds easy, the way you tell it," said Dave dubiously. "But you never can tell about a female, Wade. Still—" He began to pat himself in his search for a cigar. Wade tossed him one from the mantel. "Still," he went on as he bit off the end of it. "I ain't sayin' you won't do it, boy. I've known you three years an' I don't recollect as how you ever set out to do a thing without you done it. I ain't never see you make love to a gal, but if you can talk to 'em like you talked to that feller in Denver when



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you made him stake us to that development loan, why, that gal ain't got no more show against you than an icicle has in hell!"

"The trouble is, it isn't all talk," mused Wade.

"Ain't it? Well, talk goes a long way with the women, boy. I know that much, an' I ain't no Don Jewan, neither. Tell you what I'll do, Wade. I'll bet you a thousand dollars you win!"

"I'd rather not bet on this," answered the other with a smile. "But if I do win, Dave, you can sink some of that thousand in a wedding present."

"You bet I will, boy! I'll get you the biggest, high-toniest gold water-pitcher there is in Denver—or anything else the lady might prefer! There's one thing, though, you ain't considerin', boy."

"What's that?"

"Why, how do you know the lady ain't married already?"

"Married!" Wade's jaw dropped and he looked blank for a moment.





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"Didn't think of that?" queried Dave.

"No, I didn't. But—oh, hang it, man, she can't be married! How could she be? What makes you think she is?"

"I don't. I just said supposin'."

"Of course she isn't," said Wade self-convincingly. "Why, she didn't *look* married!"

"Well, I reckon some of 'em don't in this country," answered Dave sagely. "An' what's more a heap of 'em don't *act* married. I ain't sayin' you ain't right, boy, an' I hope you are. Only—well, say, now, I'd find out about that before I made myself any more promises."

"It's kind of late already," said Wade with a scowl. "I—I'm in pretty deep, old man. If she *is* married—"

"Yes?" asked Dave encouragingly.

Wade laughed mirthlessly.

"Well, in that case, old man, I guess you'll see me back at Lone Mesa damn soon."

"Well, well, I reckon there's a heap more



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good-lookers in this town, boy. Don't you be dis—"

"There's only one of Her, Dave and she's the only one I want. And, by the Eternal, I mean to have her! Oh, I know it sounds crazy, old man; I guess I am crazy—sort of. It's certainly got me in a heap. I never was in love before, you see; only once when I was a kid in college, and that didn't count for a damn. I've always thought men were weak and silly when they lost their heads over women, but now—well, I know better. I've lost mine, all right—and my grip, too, I guess. That suggestion of yours about her being married has sort of floored me, Dave."

He sank onto a chair and knotted his hands nervously, his pipe hanging forgotten from the corner of his mouth.

"Hell!" said Dave. "What's the use of worryin' about that until you know? Buck up, boy! I don't reckon she's married."

"Maybe—it won't matter—if she is," muttered Wade.

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"Now, now, you don't mean that!" Dave shook his head slowly. "Don't go to sayin' things you don't mean. You ain't the man to go an' jump another feller's claim, boy. I know you better'n that. Here, fill your glass an' we'll drink to it."

Dave stood up and held his glass out.

"Ready? Here's hopin', boy, God bless you!" he said earnestly. "Here's that you win."

IV

BY nine o'clock the next morning Wade was in possession of all the information to be obtained at the opera house. The box was rented by Miss M. F. Pearse, who lived a few doors from the Avenue on West Fifty-third Street. Wade made a note of the name and the house number, thanked his informant and went back to the hotel to consider his next step. Dave had intrusted himself to a hansom and had gone off down town to buy presents for Minnie and the children. So Wade had opportunity for undisturbed reflection. By noon he had smoked up a good deal of tobacco but had evolved no method of discovering the identity of the young lady save that of applying to Miss Pearse, and this morning, with the white light of a Winter day flooding the room, he realized the preposterousness of such a

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course. It occurred to him, now that it was too late, that what he should have done was to have noted the number of the electric brougham in which the party had left the opera house, discovered the chauffeur and obtained his information from him. But that chance was lost to him and it really seemed that he would have to call at the house on West Fifty-third Street and, on one pretext or another, find out what he wanted from Miss Pearse. It was possible that the elderly lady and the girl were relations, although he couldn't recall any resemblance of features, in which case it might be further possible that they lived together. On the whole, however, he was inclined to think that one of the other women was the girl's mother and that she and Miss Pearse were merely friends.

He tried to think of a plausible story to tell Miss Pearse. It would hardly do to hand her his card and say "Madam, I am in love with a young lady who sat in your box at the opera Thursday night, and I shall be

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greatly obliged if you will inform me of her name and address." He strove to recall the few detective stories he had read and wondered what Sherlock Holmes would do under like circumstances. He might, he supposed, proclaim himself a census taker or the agent for a directory, but if the girl didn't live at the Fifty-third Street residence that wouldn't answer. He was still cudgeling his brains when Dave returned, followed by a page with his arms full of packages.

"Boy," he said when the page had littered table and chairs with the parcels and taken his departure, "I've been havin' one great time! Reckon I'll have to go back this afternoon an' buy me a new trunk. Just look a' here, Wade." He began to pull the wrappings off and display his treasures. "That's for the Missis," he explained, shaking a crimson flannel wrapper at Wade. "Warm! Feel of it! An' just throw your optics on this, boy. Sewin' set, scissors, two pair of 'em, big an' little, thread, all

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sorts an' colors; darnin' cotton; thimble, real solid silver; needle-case; darnin' ball to stick in the toe of a stockin', you know; that handle's silver, too; forget what the gal called them things, bubkins, I think it was. Feel that plush! Ain't that great? Reckon that's goin' some for Lone Mesa! An' wait till I show you the toys for the kids; I got enough to stock a toy-store; paint-box for Mollie, doll—see the darn cute little thing open it's eyes, will you? Listen! Hear that? 'Mommer,' just as plain! Stick your finger there and see. Ain't that foxy? That's a box of dishes no bigger 'n your thumb. An' here's a knife for Davy an' a soldier suit—cap an' all. What they don't think of for kids ain't much, I'm tellin' you, partner. Why, blame me if I wasn't most wishin' I was a kid myself when I got up there with all them toys! An' look here! What do you think o' that, eh? Ain't that cunnin'? An' here—" He fished around in his pockets and finally brought out a tiny package which he thrust

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in Wade's hand. "I got that for you, boy. It ain't much; just a pin for your tie. Reckon you might's well have it now."

It was rather atrocious, but Wade thanked him very sincerely and tried the effect then and there, Dave standing off and viewing the result critically.

"That ain't so bad, is it? I see it in a window down on that Sixth Avenue an' I says to myself 'That's just the pin for Wade, kind o' tony an' swell.' The feller swore them was real diamonds, partner, but I got my doubts about 'em. It's a real handsome pin, though, ain't it?"

"It's stunning, Dave," answered Wade. "And if they're not real diamonds they look like them. Much obliged, old man. I'm going to put it aside until Christmas, though. I never li. d to wear my presents beforehand."

"Course not. Well, say, I'm so darned hungry I could eat raw dog. Reckon the dining room's open?"

"It's always open, Dave."



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"It is? Think o' that! Eat whenever you like, can you? Well, how you feelin' about it now? Ready to feed?"

At luncheon Wade confided his perplexities to Dave and they talked the matter over from soup to coffee without finding a solution. Afterwards Dave insisted that Wade should go down town with him and assist in the purchase of a gown for Minnie that should be as near as possible like the one which Dave had admired the evening before at the opera. "One o' them genuine red ones, boy, that there ain't no mistakin'. Minnie's almighty fond o' red. I don't mind buyin toys and such things, but women's things is different. Them gals in the stores is as haughty as biscuit-shooters; all dressed in black silk, with about a million dollars worth o' hair on their heads. They got a way o' lookin' at you, sort o' high an' mighty, that makes you feel like a hunk o' 'dobe; leastwise, that's the way it makes me feel, partner. I reckon you've had more experience with 'em. Anyhow, you can be



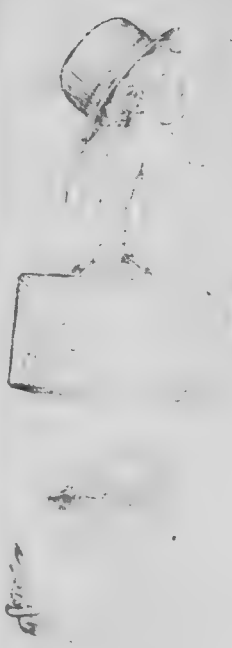
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just as haughty as they can. Me, I want to kiss 'em or slap 'em, I don't know which. Them stores ain't no proper place for a weak an' defenceless male man."

So Wade, with a regretful thought for his real mission in life, which was the discovery of the girl in the blue gown, consented, and they climbed into a hansom and set off down Broadway.

It was four days to Christmas, and New York's shopping district was a seething cauldron of breathless, frantic, maddened humanity. Christmas was in the air; the cross-town thoroughfares were lined with hawkers of mechanical toys, wreaths and greens; the shop windows would have tempted a miser to extravagance; the flower stores mingled holly and mistletoe with priceless orchids and semi-priceless roses; Santa Claus rang his bell on almost every corner; in short the Spirit of the Holidays had the great city in its grasp. There was a frosty nip in the air and the leaden sky threatened snow.





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To follow Wade and Dave in their search for the red gown would be amusing but unnecessary. They found it at last after several defeats. When Dave learned the price he gasped with amazement. But he was game, and after the subject of size had been threshed out, the gown was paid for and the saleswoman was instructed to send it to the hotel. They decided to return uptown on foot, and so crossed to the Avenue and turned northward with the throng. Dave was out of cigars and when he spied a tiny tobacco shop sandwiched in between a florist's and a big marble-fronted jewelry emporium he made for it. Wade remained outside and sauntered along to the big plate-glass show window behind which was displayed a gold-plated dinner service. Dave rejoined him in a moment, stuffing big black cigars into his pocket. Wade accepted one and lighted it. Then they turned to resume their northward progress. And at that moment Fate took a hand again.

"Wait!" exclaimed Wade. He pulled

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Dave back against the window. A taxicab had stopped in front of the entrance and the carriage man, a gorgeous, six-foot dignitary, was helping the single passenger to alight. Wade's grasp on his companion's arm tightened until the latter squirmed.

"What's the matter, boy?" he growled.

"Look! There she is now! See, Dave?"

She had paused to give a direction to the driver. A long coat of black fur and a hat of the same somber material relieved by a single gold aigrette was too much of a disguise for Dave to penetrate at first. But when the chauffeur had touched his cap sketchily and the girl had turned toward the store he recognized her. The clear face showed forth from its dark setting like a blush rose and the deep violet eyes sparkled with the excitement of Christmas shopping. As she passed the two men at a distance of a half-dozen feet her glance lifted and swept them. A little flash of recognition lighted her face. Then with something that just escaped being a smile she turned her gaze

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and passed through the revolving doors. Wade drew the deep breath of a man regaining consciousness.

"That's her, boy!" whispered Dave hoarsely. "Now's your chance!"

But Wade didn't move. He was watching the taxi turn and cross the street to take its place in the waiting line at the opposite curb.

"Ain't you goin' to chase after her?" demanded Dave disappointedly.

"I'm going to talk to that taxicab driver first," was the reply. "You stay here and watch for her." He hurried away, dodged across the Avenue at the risk of his life and accosted the driver.

"You just left a lady at the jeweler's. Where did you get her?" He pulled a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off the bottom one without glancing at it. The chauffeur, however, was more particular. He read its denomination at a glance, removed his cap and read from the yellow slip inside. The address he gave was the Pearse residence.

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"Do you know who she is?" asked Wade eagerly. "Do you know her name?"

"No, I never saw her before, sir. I never went to that address before. They telephoned to the garage and I was sent up there. The lady got in and told me to bring her here. That's all I know, sir."

"Thank you." Wade handed over the bill. "A Merry Christmas."

The chauffeur touched his cap. "Same to you, sir."

Wade hurried back to Dave.

"Seen her?" he asked.

"Nor hide nor hair," answered Dave. "What did you find out?"

"She came from that house on Fifty-third Street. She must live there, I guess. Maybe she's the old lady's niece."

"Well, what you goin' to do now?"

Wade frowned undecidedly, watching the store entrance.

"I don't know," he answered finally. "If I go in there and find her it won't do

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me any good, Dave. I—I couldn't just go up and speak to her."

"Why not?"

"I don't know her."

"Course you don't. But you never will if you don't begin, boy. Now you go an' find her an' speak right up. Tell her you like her looks an' if she ain't got no objection you'd like to call an' see her."

Wade laughed ruefully. "They don't do things that way here, old man. I've got to find a smoother way than that, I guess." His wandering gaze encountered the gorgeous window of the florist's shop.

"You stay here and watch, Dave. I'll be back in a minute."

He hurried into the florist's. "I want some roses, please, in a hurry; American Beauties, I guess."

"Yes, sir; twelve, fifteen and twenty a dozen, sir."

"Twenty."

"A dozen, sir?"

"Two—no, three. And hurry. Never

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mind a box. Just put 'em in a paper." He went to the door and watched the sidewalk in front of the jeweler's. The man was disgustingly slow, but finally the great bundle was ready and paid for and Wade was again dodging the traffic of the street. The taxicab was still in line. Wade opened the door and laid the yard-long bundle on the seat. The chauffeur watched with expressionless face.

"If the lady asks any questions you don't know a thing," said Wade. The chauffeur smiled the ghost of a smile as he touched his cap again.

"Not a thing, sir," he answered.

Wade returned to his post outside the door. "If you'd rather not wait, old man," he said, "you go on and I'll find you at the hotel." But Dave shook his head.

"Hell, I don't mind waitin'," he answered cheerfully. "There's plenty to see, boy. What you writin'?"

"Just making a note of that fellow's number and the number of the taxi,"



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answered Wade, returning his book to his pocket. "I don't intend to slip up this time."

"Well, that ain't the way I'd do it," growled Dave. "I'd put it right up to her, I would."

"Yes, and as like as not she'd call the store detective and have me put out. I guess I've got to go sort of easy, Dave, or else I'll be queered at the start. She must be buying everything in there."

It was getting colder and the lights began to flash forth from the windows up and down the Avenue. And then, at last, she appeared, stepping lithely through the entrance without a glance to left or right.

"Ain't she a winner!" whispered Dave wonderingly. "Boy, she certainly would make a hell of a splash back in Telluride! But, say, she didn't buy a darn thing!"

The carriage man was shrilling his whistle and overhead the signal flashed her number. The girl stood at one side of the entrance waiting, apparently quite unconscious of



"THE ROSES NODDED AND BECKED AS HE
STROVE TO TOUCH HIS CAP"



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the many faces that turned to stare curiously, admiringly, impertinently.

"Now's your chance," whispered Dave. "Butt in, partner!"

But Wade only looked while the taxi rolled to the curb and the attendant helped her in. Then the girl's face appeared at the door and the attendant bent forward. Something white moved into view. The attendant spoke to the chauffeur and the latter left his seat and went to the door. Wade saw him shake his head and look blank. A sheet of white paper fluttered out and blew along the curb. An impatient tooting from a big limousine behind recalled the carriage man to his duties. He waved the chauffeur back to his seat. Then from the depths of the cab appeared a great bunch of roses, its wrappings fluttering about it, and settled in the carriage man's arms. He moved back, the roses nodded and becked as he strove to touch his cap, the door banged shut and the taxicab sprang away from the curb with a warning toot.



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But as it moved forward the girl's face and the upper part of her body appeared for a moment at the glass. Her eyes swept the sidewalk hurriedly, met Wade's eyes startledly and comprehendingly and were quickly flashed away. But Wade had caught more than the glance. He had caught in that brief instant the carmine blur of a rose against the black fur of the coat!

What did he care that the carriage man was standing there foolishly clasping thirty-five American Beauties to his gold-trimmed uniform? The thirty-sixth was nestled under the chin of the girl he loved!

V

DAVE had not seen Wade put the roses in the cab and the incident engaged his curiosity all the rest of the way to the hotel, for Wade didn't think it necessary to enlighten him. That evening they went to a theatre and Dave found the entertainment more to his liking. Vocally, Lew Fields wasn't Renaud's equal; nor in similar comparison could Miss Ada Lewis be said to rival Miss Cavalieri; but as entertainers Dave maintained the Fields-Lewis combination to be far ahead.

"Course I know," he said, "that this here show tonight ain't high-class like that opera, but it suits me a sight better, partner. I reckon my tastes is sort o' punk, eh? That darned Dutchman certainly is funny, though, ain't he? I ain't laughed so much since I bit my tongue!"

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Wade was less interested in the performance than in the audience. There was the possibility that the girl might be there, and although he failed to see her there were several breathless moments when the curve of a cheek or the shape of a brown head deceived him. Afterwards, when they walked up Broadway under the flaring white lights, his eyes were busy every instant searching the throngs, peering into cabs and carriages in the hope of finding her. His heart sang happily, for at any instant he might find himself face to face with her. It was only when they reached Rector's that he gave up hoping. He had telephoned earlier in the evening for a table and the fact that their leisurely walk from the theatre had made them late gave the thin cadaverous captain an opportunity that he didn't intend to miss. He seated them impressively and presented the menu cards with his best flourishes.

"You came very near losing this table, sir," he confided to Wade as he prepared



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to take the order. "The head wanted to take it, but I held onto it, sir. I didn't know what Mr. Forbes it was—" He paused interrogatively. Wade smiled and handed him a two dollar bill.

"Thanks, captain. It's Mr. Forbes of Lone Mesa. Don't forget."

"No, sir. Thank you, sir. Mr. Forbes of Longacre. Very good, sir. And what will you order, sir? The caviare Astrikan is very nice, sir."

"Want some caviare Astrikan, Dave?" inquired Wade gravely.

"Hu."

"No, we'll pass that up, I think," said Wade. "My friend's a vegetarian. Bring two cups of gumbo, four French chops with peas, an order of celery, asparagus—hot with French dressing—, two demi-tasse, toasted crackers and Camembert."

The captain pursed his lips.

"I wouldn't advise the Camembert, Mr. Forbes. It's out of season."

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"Is it? Close season on Camembert, eh? Well, make it Roquefort, then."

"And what will you drink, sir?"

"A quart of Pol Roger. I'll leave the vintage to you."

"Thank you, sir. Ninety-eight, sir."

When the waiter had taken himself away, Dave, who had been surveying the scene with much interest, said:

"Wade, reckon that gal's here?"

"Not likely," answered Wade, suppressing a smile. "This is hardly the place to find her, Dave."

"Ain't it? Why not?" Wade explained and Dave's interest in the people about him perceptibly increased. Wade didn't eat much of that supper, but his companion did full justice to it. Between courses his attention reverted to a young woman at a neighboring table, and finally his curiosity found voice.

"I reckon the women here ain't all like that, Wade?"

"Like what?" asked Wade absently.

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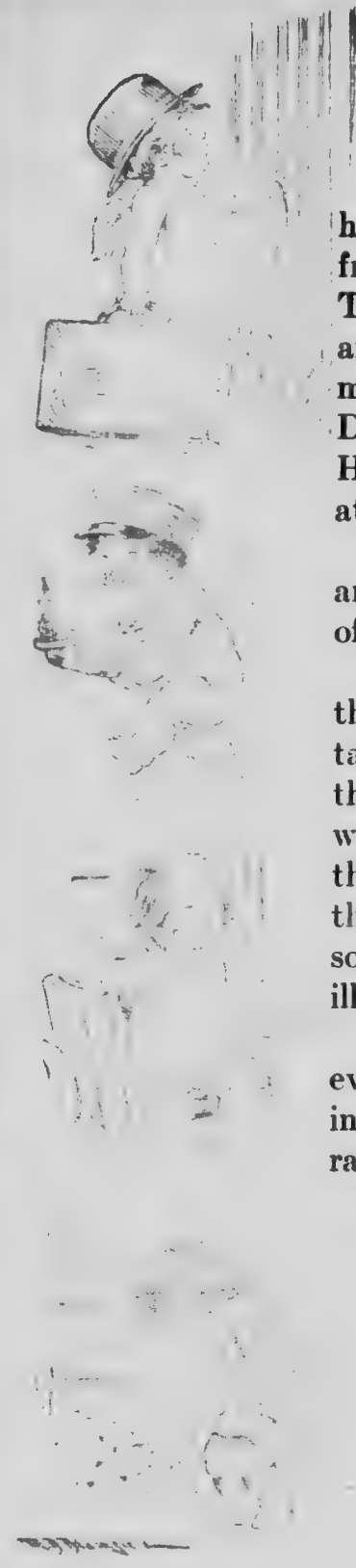
"Well, like what you said. Now that gal over there, reckon she's all right, don't you? Never saw one that looked more innocent in my life, boy."

Wade studied the girl in question a moment. She was dressed expensively but quietly. A sealskin coat draped the chair behind her and a toque of the same material nestled against her dark hair. The face beneath was that of a pale Madonna, with wide, wondering, brown eyes, hung with heavy lashes. Her table companions were three middle-aged men, blasé, weary-eyed. Their waiter was pouring the second bottle of champagne. Wade shrugged his shoulders gravely.

"Rather too innocent, isn't she, Dave?" he asked.

"Reckon that's what's been worryin' me," said Dave with relief. "She looks too much like the hound-dog after he'd et the chicken. Still—I dunno, partner. She's a mighty nice lookin' gal."

But presently the nice looking girl forgot



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her Madonna pose and sprinkled the shirt-front of the man on her right with wine. The man didn't take the pleasantries kindly and during the ensuing exchange of compliments the Madonna used words that made Dave squirm uncomfortably in his chair. He looked across and found Wade smiling at his discomfiture.

"Boy, I reckon I'm a darned tenderfoot around these diggins," he said with a shake of his head.

It was their last evening together and they prolonged their stay at the little wall table until the room was nearly empty and the orchestra had gone and the yawning waiters had begun to pile the chairs. Then they crossed the quiet, deserted square to the hotel and sought their rooms, Dave somewhat saddened by champagne and disillusionment.

"Reckon that sort of thing goes on here every night," he said, waving his cigar in the general direction of the restaurant.

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"Three hundred and sixty-five nights a year, Dave."

"This is a hell of a burg," said Dave disgustedly. "Blowin' in money, drinkin' champagne, fussin' with women! I reckon I'm glad I don't have to live here, boy."

"Oh, you mustn't judge New York by what you've seen of her, Dave. That's only one side, and the worst; the side we tenderfeet see when we come here. There's a couple of million decent, quiet, every-day folks living decent, quiet, every-day lives in this town, Dave. Only we don't rub up against 'em, old man."

"That's so," answered Dave thoughtfully. "I reckon there's folks here goes to bed at ten o'clock and eats hash for dinner. Boy, that's a cheerin' thought."

In spite of the lateness of the hour Wade stayed awake for a good hour after his head reached the pillow, his mind occupied with the problem of securing an acquaintance with the girl in the box. And before he went to sleep he had decided on a course of





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action. He knew just three persons in New York; an elderly lawyer who had been a friend of his father's, a class-mate of his own at college who was teaching at Columbia and a second college acquaintance who was in the advertising business. He would hunt them in turn and find whether they knew Miss Pearse. If by any chance they did he would secure an introduction to that lady, but he wasn't hopeful of gaining his end that way. Neither the college instructor nor the advertising man were social lights, while as for the elderly lawyer, Wade remembered him as a rather offensive, misanthropic old codger, unmarried and living in some small town in New Jersey. No, he could scarcely expect results from that trio of acquaintances, but he would see them nevertheless. If nothing came of it, and he was pretty certain that nothing would, he would go boldly to the Fifty-third Street house, request an audience of Miss Pearse and state his case. She had looked kindly, Wade recalled, and, after all, it was no

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crime to fall in love with a beautiful girl and no crime to want to meet her. The lady would probably think him crazy at first, but he hoped to be able to convince her of his sanity. He would present what credentials he could, request her to make inquiries as to his respectability and financial standing and, if satisfactory, introduce him to her neice. Oh, it was plain sailing after all. Thereupon he turned over and went to sleep.

The next morning was a busy one. Dave's trunk was to pack and the problem of getting everything into it was appalling. In the end Wade went across the street and bought a big leather bag and saved the day. After an early luncheon they crossed to the station and Wade saw Dave safely installed in his sleeper.

"I put a few things in your trunk, Dave," he said. "Something for you and Minnie, and a few trinkets for the kids. Give them all my love, old man, and wish them a Merry Christmas. There's the bell. Good



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bye, Dave. Take care of yourself. I'll send you my address as soon as I change quarters."

"Good bye, boy," growled Dave huskily. "You've gave me one good time in New York. I wish you was comin' along back with me, though. Don't you worry about the mine. I'll keep things agoin' there all right. Good bye. When you see that gal you just tell her from me that she can't do no better than take you, an' if you want me to write a good word for you just you let me know. Good-bye, boy, good-bye, an' a Merry Christmas!"

The train moved out and Wade had one last glimpse of Dave's lugubrious countenance at the window. Then he walked back up the platform toward the gates feeling a little bit lonesome. It was going to be rather dull for a day or two without old Dave. Beyond the gate he paused to consider. It was Saturday and it was doubtful if either the lawyer or the advertising man could be found at his office.

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To be sure, he might look up their home addresses, but the city seemed suddenly very big and empty and distasteful to him. It looked as though everyone was getting out of it, so great were the throngs hurrying toward the gates, and Wade experienced a desire to himself take train and go somewhere. In the end he returned to the hotel and packed a bag and in the middle of the afternoon found himself speeding northward to his old home city. He spent the night with a distant relative, who was far more surprised than pleased to see him, strolled around the town on Sunday morning with results far from cheering, and took a train back to New York at eleven with a distinct sensation of relief.

The station was almost deserted as he made his way toward the cab-stand and when a waiting-room door swung open and a group of four persons hurried through his attention was attracted.

A porter, laden with bags led the way. Then came a slight, elderly lady with silvery



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hair, and—yes—beside her trotted the One Girl in the World! A maid scurried along in the rear. A gong clanged warningly, the quartette sped through a gate, the gate slammed shut behind them and Wade woke to action too late. He dashed toward the gateman.

"Wait! Let me through!"

The gateman looked at him calmly and shook his head.

"Too late. Train's starting."

"No, it isn't; those folks aren't on yet. Stretch a point and let me through, can't you?"

"I'd have to see your ticket and by that time you'd be too late," was the untroubled reply. "There's another train at three."

"I dare say," growled Wade. "And there are some more next month, but that doesn't help me any." He looked up at the sign and read: "1:02—Shore Line Express—Bridgeport—New Haven—New London—Westerly—Kingston—Providence—Boston." The train was moving now.



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The porter swung from a platform and came back toward the gates. Wade waited for him. Why didn't the fool hurry? Perhaps when the gate was opened to let him through Wade could dash by and reach the train after all. It was a heavy one and was moving slowly. But the porter took his time and already it was too late. Wade found a half dollar and as the porter reached him slipped it into his hand.

"Those folks you just put aboard; friends of mine; where are they going?" he asked.

"Boston, boss."

"Sure?"

"Yes, sir; I seen their tickets. They pretty nigh didn't make it. They come up in a automobile an' the young lady says 'Quick, porter, we want the Boston express. I'll give you a dollar if you get us on.' " He chuckled. "Well, I got 'em on. An' I got her ol' dollar."

"Do you know who they are? What their name is?"

"Reckon you know that better'n I do,"





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answered the negro with a broad grin. "You said they was friends of yours."

"Well, when does the next train go to Boston?"

"Three o'clock, sir."

"When does it arrive?"

"Eight-thirty—if she's on time."

"The deuce!" sighed Wade. Far out in the yard the tail end of the Shore Line Express switched itself out of sight.



VI

TEN minutes later Wade sprang from a cab in front of the fifty-third Street residence and ran up the steps. It differed in outward appearance but little from a dozen other houses in that end of the block; brown-stone front, high Dutch stoop, broad windows hung with panel curtains, and griled doors. But to Wade it was different from any other house in the world, for in it lived the Girl. Even the big mat with the house number in red held a pleasant fascination for him since her feet had trod it. He had his card ready when the door opened.

"Miss Pearse?" he asked pleasantly as he entered the hall.

"Not at home, sir," replied the butler, glancing at the card.

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"Not at home?" Wade's face expressed great surprise. "But I understood--"

"The family left a half-hour ago, sir. They'll be out of town until New Year's."

"That's very disappointing," mused Wade with a frown. "I had fully expected to find Miss Pearse at home today. They left earlier than they intended?"

"I can't say, sir."

"Then I must reach her by telephone. You have her address?"

The butler hesitated. The caller spoke like an old friend of the family, but the name on the card was strange to him and he couldn't recall the face. And he was a discreet butler.

"No, sir. But if you write here, a letter will be forwarded."

"That will take too long," was the decisive reply. "Surely you know whether Miss Pearse has gone North or South or West!"

The butler hesitated, glancing at the card.

"I think, sir," he finally replied cautiously, "that they left for Boston."

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"But you don't know where in Boston I can reach her on the 'phone?"

"No, sir, I think they are to meet Master Gordon there and go on North, into Canada, tonight."

"Oh, they're going to meet the boy, eh?" said Wade carelessly. "And go on tonight. Then I can't reach her there. You didn't hear what place in Canada?"

"No, sir, I think not."

"You *think* not?" Wade dipped his hand into his pocket. The butler drew himself up haughtily.

"That's all I know, sir," he said coldly. Wade's hand came out empty.

"Well, I'll write to Miss Pearse here in the hope that the letter will be forwarded at once. Never mind the card."

The butler returned it, bowed, and Wade found himself outside again on the fascinating mat. He returned to the cab and bade the driver hurry to the hotel. There was but one thing to do and he meant to do it. Canada was a large country, and if the party

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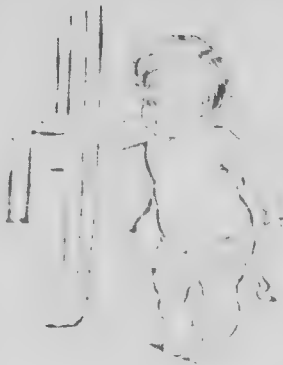
went on from Boston tonight his chance of finding them was pretty slim. But the chance was there and he would take it. To remain in New York until New Year's and await her return was out of the question, and it might be that in Boston luck would favor him again and he could discover her destination. At the hotel he opened trunk and bag, and packed the latter with clothes for a fortnight's journey. The trunk he sent to the porter's room, directing that it be held there until he sent for it. By that time it was barely two o'clock, but he didn't intend taking any risks and so had himself and bag taken to the station. For three-quarters of an hour he paced the train-shed, smoking and weighing his chances. Finally he rescued his bag from the check-room, purchased a pathfinder and some magazines and found his place in the parlor car.

The pathfinder increased his despondency. The train she had gone on was due in Boston at six, and between that hour and the time when his own train was due she

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had several opportunities of eluding him. One thing, however, seemed reasonably certain, and that was that whatever place above the border she was going to, Montreal would be her first destination. Renewed examination of the guide revealed the fact that subsequent to his arrival in Boston there were two trains which he might take to reach Montreal; one at nine o'clock, and one at eleven. There was little to choose between them in point of speed, as each reached Montreal, over different routes, at approximately the same time in the morning. The train which he ought to take and which, doubtless, Miss Pearse's party meant to take, left the North Station at eight-thirty. As he wouldn't get to the South Terminal until that time there was no possibility for him of making that connection. He noted the leaving times of the Montreal trains in his memorandum book and then faced a new contingency.

Supposing the butler either didn't know or had deliberately lied? Supposing the



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party had no intention of going beyond Boston? Wade groaned. If only he had had the presence of mind to get through that gate before it closed! As it was he was two hours behind, and those two hours might make all the difference in the world. He tossed the pathfinder onto the opposite seat.

"No use worrying," he muttered. "I'll just have to keep my wits about me and trust to luck."

After that he wondered who "Master Gordon" might be, and while he was wondering the train stopped at Bridgeport. It stayed an unconscionably long time and he began to fret. So he selected a magazine and went into the smoking-room and lighted a pipe. It was dark outside now and the lights were on in the car. Presently they were jogging along again. The magazine didn't prove very interesting and presently it slipped from his hands and his head dropped back against the wall. He must have slumbered for some time, for

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when he awoke with a start the train was still and his watch told him it was about six o'clock. There was no sight of a station and presently he grew curious. As there was no one in the smoking room to make inquiries of, he punched the button. In his own good time the porter appeared at the door.

"Where are we, porter?" Wade asked.

"'Bout eight miles west of New London, sir."

"This isn't a station, is it? What's the trouble?"

"There's a freight wreck ahead of us, sir."

"Good Lord!" groaned Wade. The porter grinned sympathetically.

"Yes, sir, we done tied up here for awhile, I reckon. Other train ain't no better off, though."

"What other train?"

"Number 18; she's held up too, sir."

Wade stared.

"You mean the train that left New York at one-two?"



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"Yes, sir."

"She didn't get by? She's ahead of us here?"

"Yes, sir, 'bout quarter of a mile down the track."

Wade jumped from his seat, pushed the porter aside and rushed into the car. The next instant he was back, bag in hand. He thrust a half-dollar at the astonished porter.

"There you are. Open that door for me, porter."

"Wh-what you all goin' do, sir?"

"I'm going to change trains. Hurry up with the door!"

"You may get left, boss," remonstrated the darkey as he pulled open the vestibule door. "That other train may pull out any time."

"Then I get left," answered Wade as he swung himself onto the ground. It was pitch dark save for the lights from the car windows and he stumbled over the ends of the ties until his eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom and descried a narrow

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path at the edge of the embankment. Once on that it was easier going and soon he was past the sobbing engine with the tail-lights of the other train faintly in sight ahead. He took to the track now, trotting along with his heavy bag swinging against his legs at every stride and threatening to bring him down. Finally he lifted it to his shoulder and had less trouble. The porter had mentioned a quarter of a mile, but Wade was sure he had underestimated the distance, for it seemed to him that the lights were as far away as ever. Every instant he feared to hear the engine signal departure. Then the tail-lights suddenly drew nearer and ahead a yellow glow came into view. They were working at the wreck by naphtha flares far down the track. Now he was almost up to the rear car and he had won his race. He slackened his pace a little and smiled to think that now that he had reached the train it was quite likely to remain there for another hour or two. And at that instant from up the track ahead came the hoarse





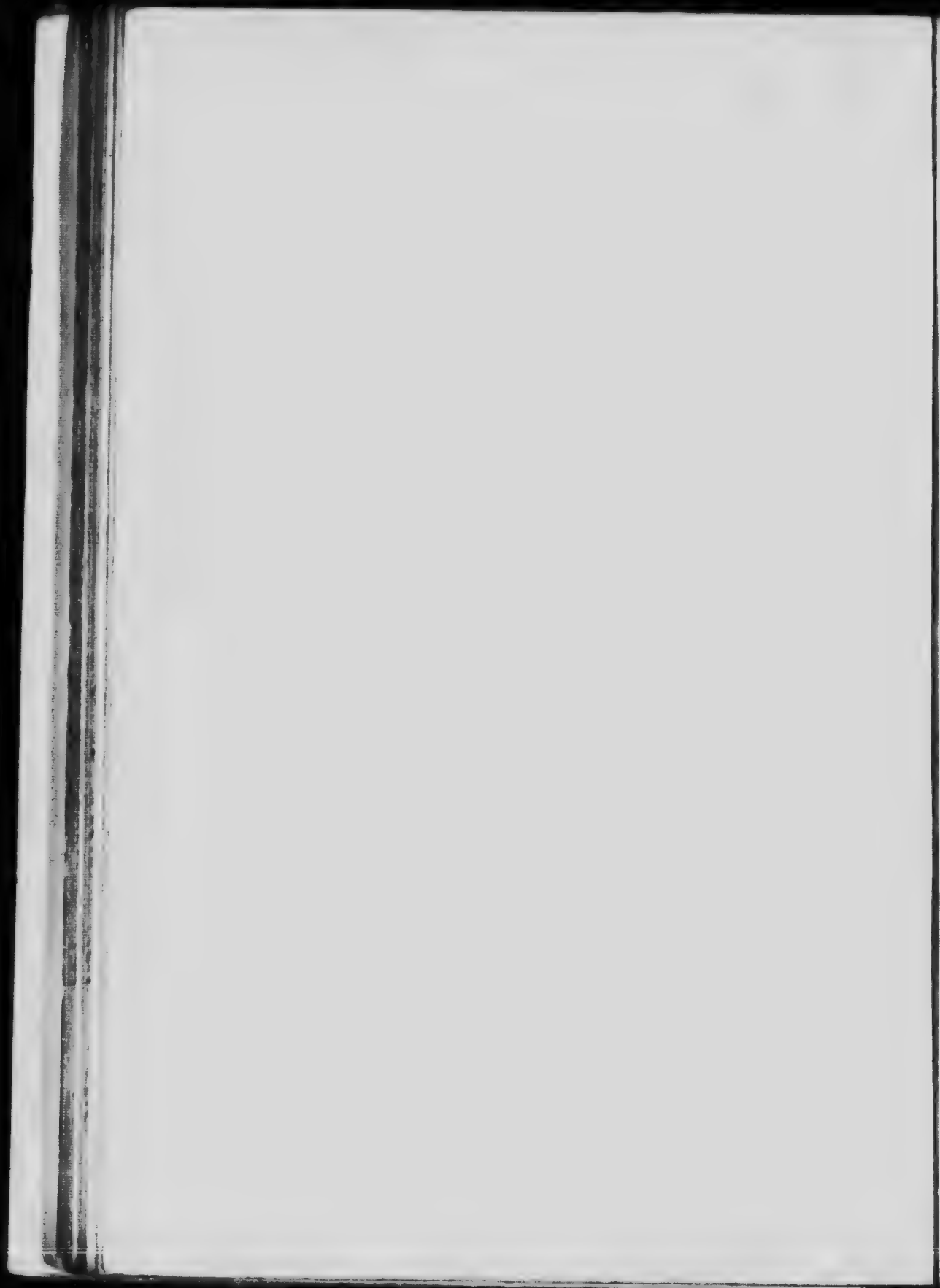
CUPID EN ROUTE

whistle of the locomotive, there was a sound of straining couplings and the rear lights began to move slowly away. Wade sprang forward, swinging the bag down from his shoulder and raced frantically over the ties. Only a few yards separated him from his goal, but for one heart-sickening moment it seemed that his goal was going to elude him. He put every ounce of strength into the chase and plunged on. The distance lessened and he sprang across a rail and gained the path. Then his outstretched hand caught the brass railing, he swung his bag onto the lower step and, free of his burden, ran alongside until he could reach the other railing with his right hand. With an effort that seemed to require every last drop of breath and strength he threw himself up beside his bag. For a moment he clung there exhausted on his knees. Then he drew himself to the upper step and with one hand clutching the bag and the other the railing leaned against the door and fought for breath.





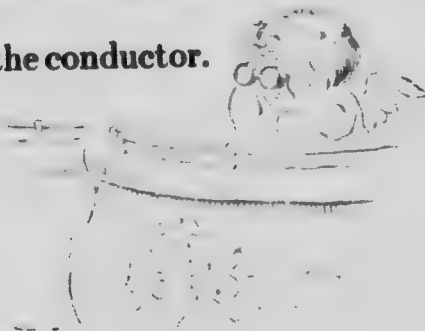
"THEN HIS OUTSTRETCHED HAND CAUGHT
THE BRASS RAILING"

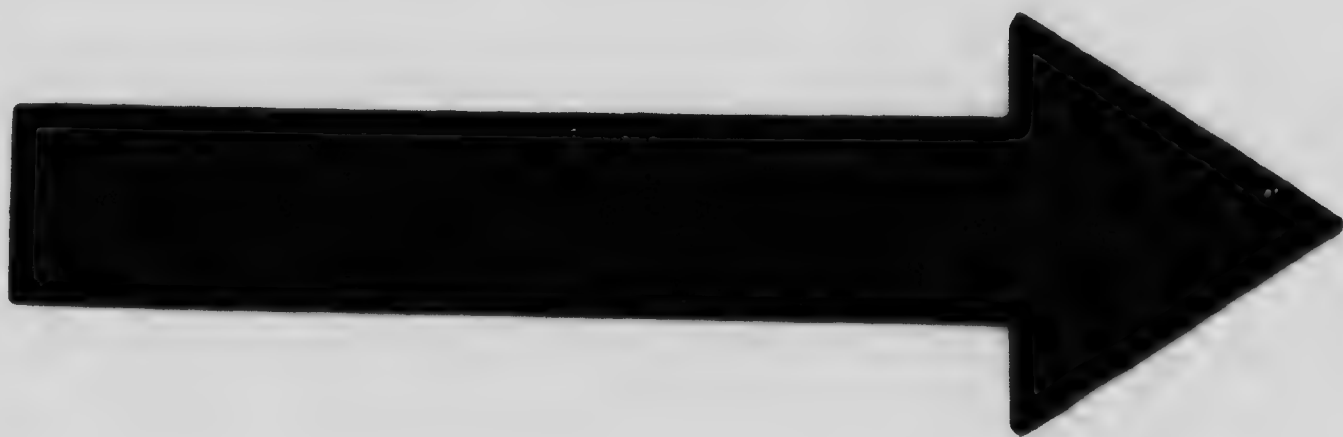


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A moment later a glare of light beat on his closed lids and he opened his eyes to find the train running cautiously by the scene of the wreck. The track was cleared, but the wreckage was piled heterogenously along the cut and in the confusion Italians were working frantically under the light of dozens of naphtha torches. The wrecked engine came into sight, lying on its side with its great driving-wheels pathetically in air. Then the glow died away behind and the train was speeding on through the darkness. Wade reached up and tried the door, but, as he had expected, it was locked. So he settled himself as comfortably as he could, closed his eyes again to keep out the cinders and waited for New London. Luckily, since traveling crouched up on the back steps of the rear car is anything but pleasant, that stop was soon reached and Wade crawled down stiff and weary and covered with dust and cinders and hurried along the platform.

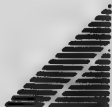
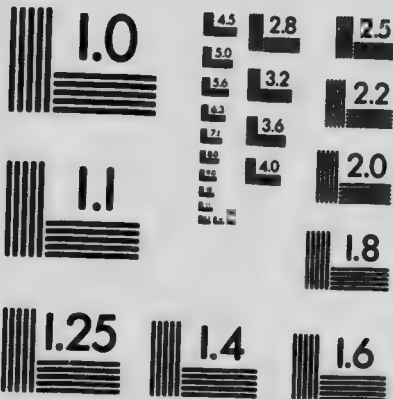
"Can I get a seat?" he asked the conductor.





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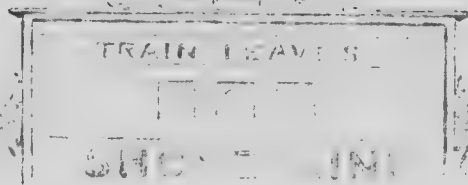
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"Number 7 in car 3." A porter seized his bag and Wade followed up the steps and into the car to sink tiredly into the chair pointed out to him. He felt oddly dizzy and closed his eyes for a moment. Outside the conductor cried "All aboard!"; the porter slammed the vestibule doors; the train moved on again. And Wade, opening his eyes, found himself looking across the car into the puzzled blue eyes of the Girl.





VII

HIS own gaze fell first, prompted by a ridiculous sense of guilt which he warmly resented the next instant. Why should he be ashamed? He had done nothing out of the way, and to prove it he would look at her again. But she had turned away now and Wade's air of conscious virtue and perfect innocence was wasted. The porter came down the aisle and stopped.

"Thirty cents, Miss. Thank you, Miss."

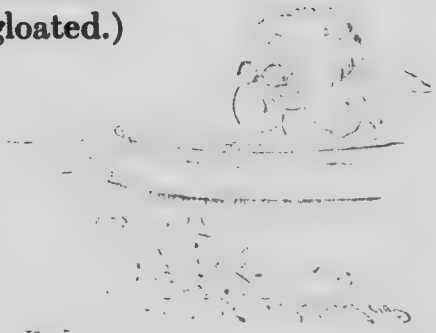
"Will they get it off right away?" asked the Girl.

"Yes'm."

Miss Pearse, in the seat ahead, appeared from behind the highly-colored covers of the Ladies' Pictorial.

"What does he say, Prue?" she asked.

("Prue!" Wade heard and gloated.)



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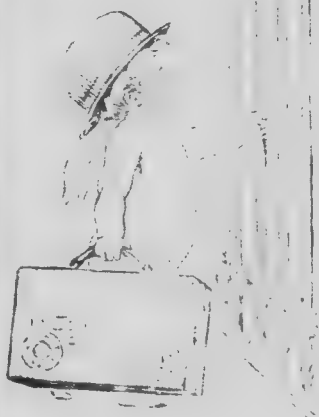
"He says they'll get the message right off, Auntie. Oh, I do hope he will get it in time. If he doesn't we'll have to stay over night there, won't we?"

"We may have to anyway," returned Miss Pearse dejectedly. "I don't believe this train will ever get to Boston. For my part, I think I'd quite as lief spend tonight in a comfortable bed at the hotel as on that train."

"But Gordon will be so disappointed, dear! It must have been frightfully dull for him at Groton. Why *do* you suppose they don't run that train from Sherbrooke to Quebec on Sundays? If we had left yesterday all this wouldn't have happened."

(Quebec! At last Wade knew where he was going!)

"My dear," replied her aunt irascibly, "If you'll tell me why the railroads in this part of the world do any of the silly things they do I'll be greatly obliged. Every time I travel in New England I make up my mind I'll never do it again! Do you realize



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that if Gordon meets us and we catch the Quebec train we won't have a bite to eat?"

"I know, and I'm hungry now! Perhaps we can snatch a mouthful at the station."

"I don't care to 'snatch' my dinner," said Miss Pearse with something like a sniff. The conductor engaged Wade's attention then and when the latter had paid his fare and was free to give his attention again to his neighbors, Miss Pearse had disappeared once more behind her Christmas number and her neice had returned to her own magazine.

"Well," he reflected, "I've discovered two very important things: that her first name is Prue and that she—and I—are going to Quebec. Also that they have telegraphed Gordon, who is probably her brother in school at Groton, to meet them either on their arrival at the South Terminal or at the North Station. Also that if we get in in time to cross town and reach the North Station and get the eight-thirty train it's going to be a quick scramble and we'll



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all go to bed dinnerless. And I'm just as hungry as she is, poor girl!"

He rang the bell and when the porter came asked:

"George, did they take that diner off at New London?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there's no buffet on board?"

"No, sir."

"Well, how late are we and when will we get in?"

"Most two hours late at New London, sir, but Cap says we'll make some of it up. If we do we ought to get in about eight."

"About eight, eh? Think I'd have time to get over to the North Station for the eight-thirty train out?"

From the corner of his eye he saw the Girl turn her head and dart a glance across at him.

"I dunno, sir Reckon if we get in by eight you can make it all right in a taxi."

"Well, you tell the conductor to hustle along, George."

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"We'll do that, sir; don't you worry; there's a heap of folks on that wants to make connections tonight."

The porter moved away and Wade looked across the aisle. The Girl was apparently absorbed in her magazine and so he could study her to his heart's content. She wore a black and white checked skirt and a gray silk waist. The suit coat hung from a hook and with it was the fur coat she had worn yesterday. Beside her chair was a small black bag adorned with a gold cypher, but the designer had done his work well and try as he might Wade couldn't make anything of the snarled letters. On the cushion in front of her rested a pair of slim patent-leather boots with gray tops and smoked pearl buttons, very clever, engaging boots indeed. She wore a black hat which came far down on her head and reminded Wade of a turban such as the Hindoos wear, formed as it seemed to be of folds of corded silk. It hid her hair almost completely and under it her face looked small and pale and



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tired. Wade's heart flooded with sympathy. That she should be forced to go to bed without anything to eat was a crime against humanity! Something would have to be done about it! And while sympathy and indignation consumed him the occupant of the chair in front of him swung around revealing the features of the maid. She leaned across and spoke to the Girl, in French, and Wade was glad the next moment that he had moved his gaze, for the Girl's glance swept past him as she looked up and replied in the same language. Wade, his gaze fixed intently on a bald head far down the aisle, wished he hadn't forgotten all the French he had ever learned. Whatever had been said, the maid seemed satisfied and turned back again. The Girl returned to her magazine. Wade's regard returned to the Girl.



She was no less beautiful today than she had been that evening in the opera house box, but she looked a little less regal, a little more human, and, to Wade, a bit

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more warm and lovable. Now and then the veriest ghost of a frown ruffled the white forehead and the long lashes flickered, and Wade, putting the symptoms down to weariness and depression and hunger, melted in sympathy until it occurred to him that she was probably aware of his steady observation and was annoyed by it. Whereupon he resolutely swung his chair around and stared at the darkened window. He had his reward, in fact two rewards. The window was like a mirror and in it he saw the Girl raise her head and look across at him for a moment, and after that he found that he could still see her almost as well as when facing her. After awhile she laid her magazine down with a little gesture of boredom and consulted her watch. After that she yawned frankly, folded her hands loosely on top of the magazine and stared at the cover of the Ladies' Pictorial.

The train slowed down and ran into the station at Providence. Wade went to the end of the car, found a time-table and

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retired with it to the smoking room. Comparing time-table and watch showed that they had already made up almost forty minutes. At that rate they might reach Boston at eight or shortly after. For the Girl's sake he almost hoped that they wouldn't, for he hated to think of her going on without any dinner. They wasted no time in Providence, but pulled out quickly and went whizzing away again through the night. A little border of snow appeared about the window casement and flakes settled against the glass to melt and trickle down in wavering paths. Wade lighted his pipe, but he had had an early luncheon and tobacco didn't taste very well. He made up his mind that he wouldn't return to his seat until they approached Boston. He wished that he hadn't left his magazines behind him on the other train in his hurry. Someone, however, had abandoned a portion of the Sunday Times and he rescued that from the smoking room floor and found that it contained the mining news.

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The rest of the journey didn't seem long, and almost before he knew it the porter routed him out and put him through the whiskbroom degree. In the car the general depression had disappeared and the occupants were restlessly tugging at coats and bags and discarding newspapers and looking hopeful. Wade got into his own coat and moved his bag into the aisle. The Girl had donned her checked coat and was sitting erect, anxious, ready for action. They stopped a moment at Back Bay and then went on.

"Boston! Boston!" called the porter. "Leave by the rear door!"

Wade was one of the first out, but on the platform he drew aside and waited. It was just nine minutes past eight. The Girl and her aunt and the maid descended hurriedly, porters seized their luggage and they scurried toward the gates. Wade followed at a discreet distance. There was only one pause in that mad exodus, and that came when a small boy in a gray ulster



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and black derby, carrying a large suit-case, met them. There were hurried kisses and then the party sped on again, the small youth fairly running along at the Girl's side. Out on the sidewalk they tumbled into a taxicab, the luggage was tossed in after them, the porters were tipped and the chauffeur cranked up and sprang to his seat. Wade lost no time. He threw his bag into the next cab.

"Follow that taxi ahead," he said, "and don't lose it for a minute. Hurry up, now!"

Then began a wild ride through the narrow deserted snow-sprinkled streets of Boston. Wade's driver proved the man for the work, for he cut down the distance between his car and the one ahead in the first block and after that dogged it all the way to the North Station, sweeping under the arch not a length behind. The big clock on the facade said eighteen minutes past as the cab turned in. When he jumped out the party ahead were already entering the waiting room on their way to the train.

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Wade settled with his driver, relinquished his bag to a porter and hurried after.

"What train, sir?"

"Eight-thirty for Quebec."

"This way, sir."

Wade caught sight of a lunch room and a brilliant thought occurred to him.

"Wait a minute," he called, and sprang through the doors. "Sandwiches, about a dozen," he shouted, "fruit—or—cake—anything, only hurry it up! Enough for five persons."

He waited, watching the clock, and the porter waited, watching Wade and the clock alternately. Twenty-three minutes past—twenty-four—twenty-five—twenty-six—

"Here you are, sir, a dollar-eighty."

"All right; keep the rest!" And Wade hurried after the porter again. There was still three minutes to spare as they dashed through the gate. "What car you in, sir?" gasped the porter.

"I don't know; I haven't a ticket; find the Pullman conductor."



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"Next car forward, sir. Here you are, sir. Got a berth for this gentleman, Cap?"

"No, nothing left; everything taken. Just sold the last one half a minute ago."

"How about a berth in the smoking room?" asked Wade a trifle blankly.

"All taken," answered the conductor impatiently, turning to help a passenger aboard.

"Sorry, sir," said the porter. "Go into a day coach, sir?"

"Sure! Hustle along!"

"A-all abo-oard!" sang the conductor. A bell clanged somewhere. Wade sprang up the steps of a day coach and the porter tossed the bag after him.

"Thank you, sir." He caught the coin deftly in midair. "Better see him again, sir; there might be something left; sometimes folks don't turn up."

"Well," Wade reflected philosophically as he carried his bag to a seat, "it won't be the first time I've slept in a day coach And, anyhow, I've got some supper."

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He put his overcoat in the rack, placed the bag on the seat and the luncheon beside it, and went back to reconnoiter. The next car back was a sleeper, and he walked through it expecting every minute that his eager eyes would light on the Girl. But she was not there. He went back to the next one. It was as crowded as the first, but where—He walked slowly down the aisle, looking to left and right. The Girl was not to be seen! Nor was Miss Pearse! Not even the maid or the small boy! Wade's heart sank, but arose again. The explanation was quite simple. There was still another sleeper on the train. He had noticed but two, but in the hurry he had, of course, overlooked one. He went back through the passage, opened the rear door—and found himself looking onto the track! He slammed the door shut again and reflected frowningly. Perhaps he had passed them without seeing them. He would retrace his steps and look more carefully. He did so, but when he had reached the forward

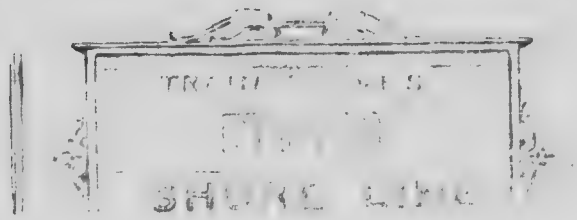




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end of the first sleeper again he had to acknowledge defeat. Slumping into the smoking room, there he cast himself dejectedly on to the seat.

He had missed her after all! She had gone off on another train! If only he hadn't stopped at the damned lunch room!



VIII

THE Pullman conductor entered, diagrams in hand, and seated himself opposite. Wade watched him compare and erase and alter and tried to decide whether to leave the train at the first stop or to remain on it. If he got off and returned to Boston he wouldn't be any better off than he was now. No, the only thing to do was to get to Quebec as best he could and trust to finding the Girl there. Luckily Quebec wasn't very big and it would be difficult for Prue—he had begun to call her that in his thoughts—to escape discovery. He wondered about that other train; it was strange that he had seen no mention of it in the guide. Perhaps he had misunderstood and she was not going to Quebec after all!

"Conductor," he asked, "is there another

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train for Quebec leaving at eight-thirty or around there?"

The conductor made a last correction and slipped his pencil back.

"No, nothing until nine," he answered, looking up. "Aren't you the gentleman who wanted a berth?"

"Yes."

"Thought so. Sorry there isn't anything. Travel's heavier tonight than I've seen it for months. Everybody's going home at once, it seems."

"Could I leave this train and get the nine o'clock anywhere along here?"

"Yes, at Lowell; 9:10. I don't know whether you could get anything on that or not, though. You might try it."

"When would I get to Quebec?"

"Well, if you made connection at Montreal you'd get there about three tomorrow," Wade glanced at his watch.

"I believe I'll try it," he muttered.

"If this snow keeps up, though," continued the conductor, "we are both likely

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to be late." He leaned forward and looked out of the window. "It's coming hard now. And there's about four inches of it on the level up North already. Well!" He got up briskly and moved toward the door. "You can sit in here, sir, until the porter gets ready to make up these berths. Those day coaches are pretty crowded."

"Thank you," answered Wade, "but I guess I'll try my luck on the other train. I had luck the last time I changed," he added to himself, "and maybe I will again."

When the train slowed down at Lowell he was ready with his bag and the package of luncheon. His appetite seemed to have disappeared, but he thought it wise to hold on to the luncheon until he was certain it wouldn't be needed. It was probable, however, that he could get a cup of coffee and some refreshment here at the station; as the next train wouldn't come along for a half hour he would have plenty of time. In answer to that reflection a coffee urn gleamed a welcome to him through a win-

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dow as he alighted. He dodged the waiting passengers on the platform and made for the lunch room. But in the doorway something impelled a backward look at the train he had left. His gaze idly swept along the line of lighted windows. Here and there some were already dark, showing that the porter was busy making up.

"All abo-oard!"

The train started, the wheels crunching on the snowy rails, and the first sleeper moved slowly by in front of him. Then came the second and a broad window flashed into sight, and Wade, across the platform, found himself looking into a drawing-room and in the drawing-room sat four persons, one of whom was gazing longingly out at the gleaming coffee urn!

Wade's heart leaped into his throat, and the next instant he was racing along the wet platform in pursuit of the front vestibule of that last sleeper. He collided violently with a stout woman and caromed off her into a baggage-man who swore luridly until

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long after Wade had clambered onto the steps and had disappeared in the darkness. It was the Pullman conductor who responded to Wade's pounding on the door.

"Hello!" he said as he helped him through. "Thought you'd left us."

"I changed my mind. Thanks." He made his way back to the day coach ahead and found that two French Canadians had taken the seat he had abandoned. There was nothing left save the small seat behind the door, but he didn't care. He had found the Girl! He put his bag in a vacant rack and then turned his attention to the contents of the paper package. He had almost lost it from under his arm in that wild dash for the train, but save that the sandwiches were slightly squashed and an over-ripe banana had done its worst it was still a perfectly good luncheon. There were twelve sandwiches, some of ham and some of chicken; three oranges, four bananas—one no longer worthy of consideration,—three apples and six slices of rather stale



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cake. Wade laid aside two sandwiches, an apple and a banana and returned the rest to the paper. It didn't make a very attractive package, he had to confess, but he didn't believe that the occupants of the drawing room were in a mood to be overcritical. Package in hand, he went back to the second sleeper.

What an ass he had been not to have thought of the drawing-rooms! It had happened, however, that the door of each had been closed when he had made his search and their presence had never occurred to him. Well, all was well that ended well. The smoking room was crowded, so he put his head around the corner into the aisle and found the porter busy a few berths away. That worthy came at his call, and his frowns smoothed themselves away at sight of the dollar bill which Wade diplomatically exhibited.

"Porter," he explained, "I want you to take this bundle of sandwiches and fruit to the party in the drawing-room. Just



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Just



"PACKAGE IN HAND, HE WENT BACK
TO THE SECOND SLEEPER"



CUPID EN ROUTE

tell them a gentleman sent it, believing them to be hungry. If they ask what I look like tell them you didn't notice. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand." He grinned appreciatively. "I reckon they'll be mighty pleased to get it, sir. Young lady says she's most starved to death. Asked me could I get her something at Lowell, but there wasn't time." He tucked the money away under his jacket.

"Mind, now, don't let them get anything out of you."

"No, siree! I forgot what you look like already!" And he went off the aisle, package in hand, chuckling enjoyably.

Wade saw him knock on the drawing-room door and then he went back to his seat in the drafty day coach, took a sweater from his bag and rolled it up for a pillow, stretched himself out on his short couch, his legs draped picturesquely over the arm, drew his coat over him and prepared for slumber.





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"Come."

"Yes'm. Gentleman says present this to you with his compliments." The porter held out the package with an air. Miss Pearse took it, turned it over curiously.

"Gentleman? What gentleman?"

"I dunno, ma'am. Just a gentleman. Said he reckoned you all was hungry, ma'am."

"Hungry? What—what is it?" She viewed the brown paper parcel distastefully.

"San'wiches an' fruit, he said."

"Oh, Auntie! Sandwiches!" cried Prue.

"Dandy!" exclaimed the boy. Even Leone, the maid, showed signs of interest.

"Impertinent!" said Miss Pearse. "The idea! A strange man! Tell him, porter, that—"

"We're very, very much obliged!" Prue seized the parcel and tore off the paper. "Oh, Gordon, they're ham! Think of ham sandwiches!"

"Honest? Gee, Prue, let's get at 'em! I'd rather have ham than any kind when I'm real hungry!"

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"But, my dear," said her aunt, "you mustn't eat that—that stuff! Why, it may be poisoned!"

"Nonsense, Auntie! And even if they are I'd rather die quickly of poison than starve to death lingeringly. Porter, bring a table and we'll have a feast. There's cake here, too, Gordon."

"And bananas! Say, Prue, who's your friend?"

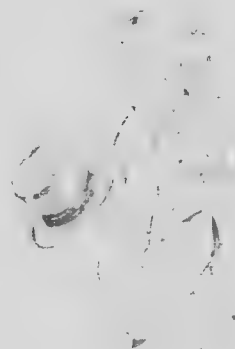
"I wish I knew," she laughed. "Whoever he is, he's saved one life tonight. You sit here, Auntie, and—"

"Indeed, I shan't touch the awful things!" sniffed Miss Pearse. "And, what's more, I forbid you to."

"Aunt Mildred, you may forbid and forbid," laughed Prue, "but I'm certainly going to eat. Gordon dear, get some water in the glass. Leone, what do you want, chicken or ham?"

"It makes no matter," replied the maid, "I am so verree hongaree."

"It makes a lot of matter here," cried



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Gordon. "I want a ham, Prue, a big one, too. That's a rhyme. Gee, they're good! Who do you suppose sent 'em, Prue? Maybe it was that conductor. I saw him looking at you, sis!"

"Did you?" she laughed. "Auntie dear, try one of these? They're perfectly delicious."

Aunt Mildred viewed the proffered sandwich distrustfully.

"No, I shall take an orange."

"Oranges come later, for dessert," said Prue. "Sandwiches first. Please just try it."

"We-ell, I suppose we might as well all die together! Just a little piece of it, dear."

"No, all or none," said Prue firmly. "Think how you'd feel if you lingered on for an hour or so after the rest of us had gone!"

"Prue! You do say such awful things! I'll never be able to swallow this now!"

But she did, and followed it with a second and ate a whole orange. And in ten minutes

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there was nothing left of the banquet but crumbs and fruit puddings and the porter was summoned to remove the table. Prue tore a corner from the brown paper and sat down with a pencil in her hand.

"What are you going to do, sis?" asked Gordon with lively interest.

"Send a note of thanks, dear."

"Prue! Why, you don't know who he may be!" remonstrated her aunt.

"Who he is doesn't matter, Auntie. Please don't begin to be prudish just because you're back in New England. I thought I'd broken you of that, dear. Porter, is the gentleman who sent the things on this train?"

"Yes'm, I reckon he is."

"I say, porter," demanded Gordon, "was it the conductor?"

"I dunno, sir, whether it was or not."

"You don't know!" exclaimed Aunt Mildred sharply. "Do you mean to say you don't know your own conductor when you see him?"

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"Yes'm, I know it wasn't him. He might be a conductor, though.

"What did he look like?" asked Prue.

"I sorter forget, Miss. Didn't notice specially, Miss."

"Oh, then you wouldn't know him if you saw him again?"

"No, ma'am."

"I'm sorry because I wanted you to take this note to him."

The porter looked at the scrap of folded paper and rubbed his head reflectively.

"Well, Miss, you give it to me an' maybe I'd know him if I was to look mighty sharp."

Prue smiled.

"Very well, porter, you look sharp and refresh your memory. And if you *should* find him give him this. You may take the table away, please."

Wade was just slipping off into light slumber when the porter aroused him. He sat up and took the scrap of paper, leaning forward until the light fell on the penciled writing.

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"The ladies present their compliments to their unknown benefactor and thank him most cordially.

"They thought he had missed the train."

Wade smiled blissfully and dove his hand into his pocket.

"Here you are, porter. And look here; you look after those ladies the best you know how; understand? If you don't, I'll just about lay you out!"

The porter grinned cheerfully as he dropped the coin in his pocket.

"Yes, sir, I hear you. I'll look after 'em, sir, don't you worry. Good night, sir. Sorry I can't have you in my car; this is mighty mean 'commodations for a gentleman."

The subtle accent on the word gentleman really merited further emolument, but Wade was eager to be left alone. When the porter had gone he re-read the note, looked at it from every angle, read it again, and then finally furtively pressed his lips to it and tucked it carefully away in his pocket-book. After that, curled up on his

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seat, with the drafts playing tag about him, he lay staring at the light overhead until long after midnight, contentment of mind more than equalizing bodily discomfort.

IX

THEY pulled into Sherbrooke over an hour late with the snow falling busily out of a low and leaden sky.

It was only a little more than half-past eight then, but Wade had been awake ever since six o'clock, and awake a good deal before that, and as soon as the train came to a stop in front of the station he was out and plowing through the snow to the dining room. A cup of steaming hot coffee set him right and, preferring to eat his breakfast at his leisure, he transferred his bag to the New York sleeper. The Boston and Maine, with its proverbial solicitude for its patrons' comfort and convenience, ran no sleeping car through from Boston to Quebec, but required passengers to arise in the early morning and change to the New York sleeper, thus acquiring

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exercise and a breath of fresh air, both of which are of course beneficial. If the New York sleeper was full, Boston passengers rode the rest of the distance to Quebec, a matter of five hours or so, in a day coach. This saved them money, and, in theory at least, taught patience and fortitude.

Luckily for Miss Pearse's party and for Wade, who proved to be the only passengers bound for Quebec, the New York sleeper offered this morning plenty of space. When Wade entered he found the quartette ensconced in a section at the farther end of the car from the seat assigned to him. Disposing of his bag and coat, he went down the aisle to find the porter and order breakfast. As he passed he sought Prue's eyes and found them, but they accorded him a mere uninterested glance without a flicker of recognition. He was disappointed, and when, after ordering his breakfast at the door of the buffet, he returned to his seat he avoided glancing toward her. From where he sat he could only see the top of

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her hat, and he reflected that the journey promised to be rather dull and uninteresting. He considered having the conductor change his seat to one in the middle of the car on the other side, since there were empty seats there, but decided not to. He didn't want her to think that he was trying to flirt with her. After he had eaten his breakfast, however, his spirits rose again. He bought a morning paper and retired to the smoking room. As it was a Montreal paper he had soon exhausted its powers of entertainment. Then for a while he watched the snowy landscape. The train ran smoothly and noiselessly between banks of crisp, immaculate snow thrown up by the plows. The big, listless, leisurely flakes blotted out the distances and the gray sky seemed very near. Someone entered and took a seat opposite and Wade glanced across. It was the boy. He had brought a magazine with him and was turning the pages uninterestedly, seemingly more attentive to the advertisements than the reading

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matter. Once or twice he shot a speculative glance at Wade. He was a nice-looking lad of apparently thirteen, with clear blue eyes, a fresh, healthy complexion and brown hair slicked straight back from his forehead in a way that added to the ingenuousness of his expression. His likeness to the Girl was so patent that Wade warmed to him at once.

"How's everything at Groton?" he asked. Gordon looked up in surprise.

"All right, sir. How'd you know I was from Groton, though?"

"Perhaps I can tell a Groton man when I see one," replied Wade smilingly. "I went to St. Mark's myself."

"Did you?" asked the boy eagerly. "Did you play football?"

"Yes, I was on the team three years and we licked you twice in that time."

"Gee, that must have been a long while ago! You don't do it very often nowadays."

"That's so; you chaps are too much for

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us. Still, we got you again this year, I think?"

Gordon nodded gloomily. "Yes, six to nothing. Did you see it?"

"No, I was in Colorado then. What form are you in?"

"Second, sir. What position did you play?"

"Left tackle and guard. That was away back in ninety-four,—five and—six; rather before your time." Gordon pondered, looking interestedly across.

"Did they play the game about the way we play it now, sir?"

"N-no, those were the days of the mass-plays, the flying-wedge and guards back. And I'm enough of an old-timer to think that football then was a heap more interesting than it is now."

Gordon took up the cudgels for "new football" and they threshed it out between them. Then Wade told some stories of the old days at St. Mark's, and Gordon, not to be outdone by a representative of the rival

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school, narrated a few Groton legends, and by that time the entente cordial was firmly established. It wasn't difficult to turn the conversation in the direction Wade desired and he was soon in possession of much information regarding his traveling companions.

The boy's name was Gordon Herrick Burnett and he lived in New York with his sister Prue and his Aunt Mildred. His parents were both dead and Aunt Mildred was his guardian. "She was Prue's guardian, too, until last year. Now Sis is her own boss. Wish I was! She can do just as she pleases."

They were going to Quebec for the holidays on his account. He had never been there, but Trask, a fellow in his class, had told him about it and he guessed it must be lots of fun. "They have a skating rink and two or three toboggan slides, and there's a place called Montmorency where you go and coast on sleds. And you can snow-shoe, too. Did you ever do that, sir?"

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"Yes, we use snow-shoes a good deal in the mountains in winter." Gordon hesitated a moment. Then,

"I don't suppose you're going to stay in Quebec," he observed anxiously.

"I expect to be there over Christmas, at least."

"Really? Then—then would you show me about snow-shoeing, sir? I never could do it right."

"I'll show you what I know," said Wade, "if you'll initiate me into the mysteries of tobogganing."

"You bet! Haven't you ever done any of that? Gee, it's the best fun there is! Trask says they have a slide right outside the hotel, but maybe he's lying. I'm going skeeing, too. Ever try that, sir?"

Wade owned that he hadn't.

"Neither have I. But they say it's lots of sport. Guess the first thing I'll have to do is to buy some things; snow-shoes, skees, maybe a toboggan, but I guess Prue's going to give me one for Christmas. Say, we're

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going to have a Christmas tree, Prue says. Won't that be dandy? Of course, trees are for kids, I guess, but I like them, don't you?"

"Very much."

"Yes, they're so kind of—of Christmas; they smell so good, don't they. Would you care to come to my tree, do you think, sir?"

"I'd like to very much," answered Wade gravely. "I haven't been to a Christmas tree for a long time. Perhaps, though, your sister wouldn't care to have a stranger."

"She won't mind," said Gordon carelessly. "She's a good sport, sis is. I'll speak to her about it. Are you going to our hotel?"

"Maybe. Which one is yours?"

"I mean the one we're going to. I forget the name of it, but it's the biggest one there. Have you been to Quebec before, sir?"

"No, this is my first visit."

"Mine too. I hope we'll like it," said Gordon gravely. "Are you—are you going up alone, sir?"

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"Quite alone."

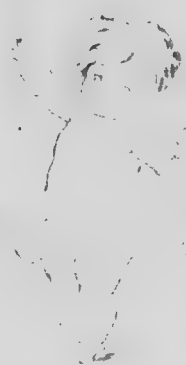
"Maybe, though, you know folks there."

"Not a soul." Gordon brightened.

"Then—then maybe you and I might—might—" He paused in slight embarrassment.

"Might chum together, you mean?" asked Wade smilingly. "Suppose we do. I'd like it first rate."

"So would I, sir. We could go snow-shoeing and tobogganing and skeeing and have a pretty good time I should think. Guess I'd better go back now. I—I'll see you later." He smiled shyly and went out with his delightful school-boy swagger. He had forgotten his magazine and Wade picked it up and strove to interest himself in a Christmas story. But he soon decided that his own thoughts were preferable, and, lighting his pipe, he smoked and watched the pearl-gray world slip by the car window, and let his thoughts lead him where they would. But they didn't take him far afield; no farther, in fact, than the length



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of the car. An hour went by and the boy returned.

"I left my magazine," he announced. But having recovered it he lingered and, finding encouragement in Wade's smile, seated himself again.

"It's all right about the Christmas tree," he announced. "I told Prue and she said I could invite you if I wanted to. Aunt Mildred wanted to know who you were, though. Would you mind telling me, sir? It doesn't make any difference to me, of course, but Aunt Mildred is sort of fussy and old-maidish."

"My name," laughed Wade, "is Forbes, Wade Forbes."

"Forbes," repeated the boy, memorizing. "Thank you. I'll tell her."

"She may want to know more than that, though, so you can tell her that I am a mining man, come of a respectable Northern New York family, reside at present in Colorado and am on a vacation."

"I told her about your being a St. Mark's

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fellow," said Gordon. "Did you go to college, sir?"

"Yes, Harvard; Lawrence Scientific; Class of 1901. I suppose your sister—Miss Burnett wasn't—er—especially curious about me?"

"Oh, no, sis isn't a crank," replied Gordon cheerfully. "It's just Aunt Mildred. Sis says it's because she was born in New England, but I suppose that's just a joke. I like New England, myself. Do you?"

"I think so; I used to."

"I'm going to Yale. That's in New England, too, isn't it? I don't see why Connecticut should be in New England and New York not; do you?"

"It does seem rather puzzling," said Wade.

"I wonder what time it is." Gordon produced a silver watch with a dangling leather fob adorned with the Groton seal. "Gee, it's most twelve. I'm awfully hungry. Wish there was a dining car on, don't you? All they have here is baked beans

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and corn-beef hash and eggs. Guess I can eat most anything today, though." He paused and chuckled. "A funny thing happened last night," he confided. "Prue and Aunt Mildred were late getting into Boston; there was an awful wreck on the line somewhere near New London, you see; so we didn't have time to get anything to eat. And we were all just about starving. We tried to get the porter to go out at one of the stations and bring us something but he said there wasn't time. I don't believe I ever was so hungry! And then what do you think?"

Wade shook his head.

"Someone sent us a lot of sandwiches and fruit and cake! The porter brought them and he wouldn't tell who it was sent them. I bet, though, it was that fresh conductor. I saw him making up to sis. The porter said it wasn't him, but I bet it was, just the same."

"Well, whoever he was he saved the day, I guess."

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"You bet! Gee, those sandwiches were good!" He smiled reminiscently. Then, "What do you do when you're a miner, sir?" he asked. "Do you dig up gold?"

After that for a half-hour the conversation had to do with mining and miners, and Gordon was intensely interested in all that Wade told him. Some of the stories made his eyes sparkle.

"Gee, I believe, I'll be a miner when I get through college," he exclaimed. "It must be lots of fun. And a fellow could get pretty rich, couldn't he, if he discovered a good mine?" He observed Wade admiringly. "I suppose you've got a lot of gold, sir?"

"A little," Wade laughed. "But good mines aren't so easy to find, my boy. And it's a pretty hard life, take it all around."

"I'd like it," declared Gordon emphatically. "I'd like to travel around like that and look for gold or silver. That would be a lot of fun. Then, if I didn't find a mine, I could buy one."

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"Good ones are rather high, though," said Wade with a smile.

"Yes, but you see, sir"—Gordon looked apologetic—"you see I'll have a lot of money when I'm twenty-one. Aunt Mildred says I'll have more than is good for me and Prue says I must learn how to take care of it. It'll be—" he hesitated, eying Wade doubtfully as though not certain whether their friendship yet warranted such confidences—"it'll be pretty near two million dollars, I guess."

Wade opened his eyes.

"Well, that *is* some! I guess your sister is right, my boy; you want to learn just what money means before that comes to you. I don't suppose—your sister has anything like that much?"

But Gordon nodded, gazing gravely out of the window.

"Yes, she got half, sir. Sis says it's a nuisance, having so much money. But I guess that's just because she's a woman and doesn't understand business. And then,

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men are always bothering her, too. You see, they know she's got it and they want to marry her. I suppose that worries her, don't you?"

"I should think it might," answered Wade thoughtfully. "She—er—she hasn't decided to marry any of them, yet, then?"

"Don't believe so. Aunt Mildred's always after her to get married but she says she isn't going to. I guess she will, though, some day. She's turned down some corking chaps, too."

"Has she?" murmured Wade.

"Yes. I guess if she marries anyone it'll be Kingdon Smith. He's awfully sweet on her and she likes him pretty well, I guess. Do you know him? He's the crack polo player, you know."

"I've heard of him but have never met him. It isn't definitely decided, then?"

"No, I don't think so. Say, I'm going to make 'em order lunch. I'm beastly hungry. Good-bye, Mr. Forbes. I'll tell Aunt Mildred all about you."

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"Thank you," said Wade gravely.

When the boy had gone he pursed his lips for a whistle that ended in a groan.

"Of all the miserable luck!" he muttered. "Why in Heaven's name does she have to be a millionairess?" He smiled ruefully at his pipe. "Dave, I guess your gold water pitcher is quite safe!"

He returned presently to his seat in the car, the savor rather gone out of the adventure, and had his luncheon. As he ate he could just see the top of the girl's head above the backs of the seats down the car. Perhaps it was this scant view of her, or perhaps it was the luncheon, at all events he returned to the smoking room afterwards for his cigar in a more cheerful frame of mind.

"After all," he reflected, "she's just a woman, millions or no millions. And even if I can't play polo, I'm as good a man as Kingdon Smith. Besides, I'm here and he isn't!"

The train slowed down and for a minute

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ran cautiously between the banks of crisp, clean snow tossed aside by the plows. It had been snowing hard for an hour or more and it was evident that every mile of northward progress increased the difficulties of travel. A water-tank slipped slowly by the window and was followed by a tiny station on the platform of which three fur-coated and gayly sashed habitants watched the train with incurious eyes. Wade read the sign, "St. Anselme," and then, with a series of diminishing jerks the train came to a stop. There was the whistle of releasing brakes and a great stillness settled down. The only sound that reached him was the faint murmur of voices from the car. Outside the window the flakes fell straight and silently from a gray void, hushing the world and hiding it from sight. Wade sought his time-table. St. Anselme was not a scheduled stop. He glanced at his watch and found that the time was three minutes past two. At this rate, he told himself, they were not likely to reach Que-



CUPID EN ROUTE

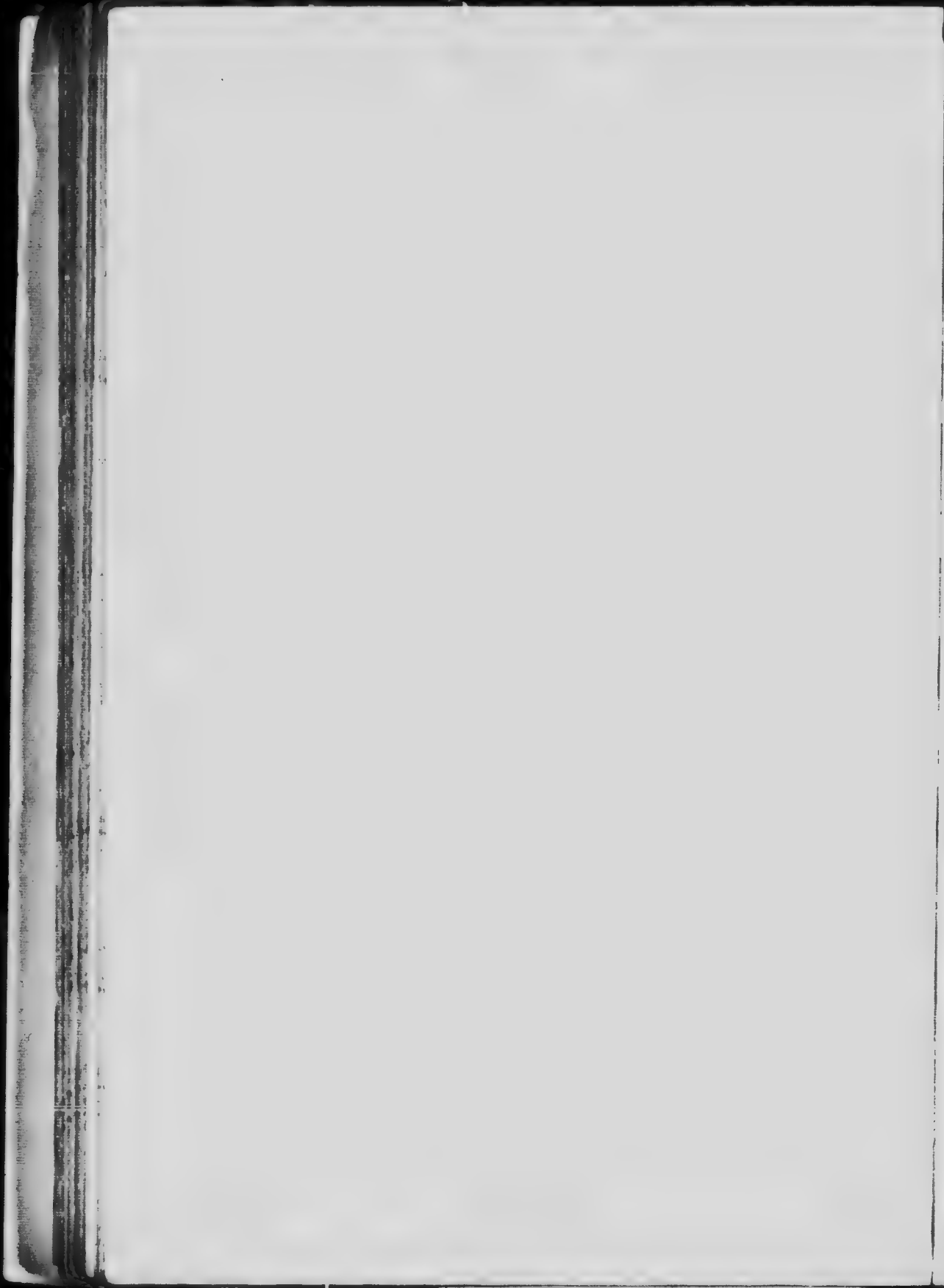
bec much before dark; they had left Beauce thirty minutes ago, all of two hours late, and it was safe to say that they had been losing time steadily ever since. Well, it mattered little, he reflected, and settled himself back against the cushion, half-drowsily watching the purple-gray smoke of his cigar billow up into the cold white light of the windows. Ten minutes passed and the opening of a door at the farther end of the car aroused him. Presently the conductor passed the smoking-room and Wade hailed him.

"The track between here and St. Henri Junction isn't clear yet, sir," the conductor explained patiently. "I think we'll be held up here at least an hour, sir. Sorry, but we'll get into Quebec in plenty of time for supper."

Wade grunted skeptically as the conductor vanished with a smile that at once disclaimed responsibility and begged indulgence. Wade went out into the car and got his coat and slipped it on. A glance



"SHE CAST A FLEETING GLANCE
AS SHE WENT BY"



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at the group farther along told him that boredom held them fast. Outside Wade found that the train was standing a hundred feet north of the little station. It was good to get out into the air even if the flakes came thick enough to blind one, and for a time he strolled back and forth along the short length of platform. Then he returned to his car, and as he paused in the vestibule to shake the snow, the girl and her brother came out and went by him down the steps. The girl had put on her fur coat and a little rowdyish felt hat whose down-turned rim almost hid her face from sight. She cast a fleeting glance as she went by and the boy smiled understandingly at his new acquaintance. Wade routed a book from his bag and settled himself again in the smoking-room, wishing the while that he had delayed his outing until now. A half-hour passed quietly. Once or twice the door at the other end of the car opened and shut. The conductor passed the smoking-room once and a ruddy-faced man whom

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Wade had previously discovered to be the manager of an asbestos mine down the line wandered in and went promptly to sleep in a corner. Then Wade looked up from his book to find Gordon observing him from the doorway.

"Well, we're not getting along very fast, are we?" asked Wade with a smile.

"No, sir," answered the boy. "I guess we'll be lucky if we get there in time for supper. I measured the snow out there and there's almost a foot of it on the level." He caught sight of the slumbering occupant of the corner and lowered his voice. "I wish I had some snowshoes here."

"What would you do? Walk the rest of the way?"

"No, sir," he replied with a grin, "but I'd get out there and practise using them." He pulled his cap down onto his head as he prepared to go on. "I'm looking for Sis," he explained. "She went back to send a telegram."

Wade nodded and then, feeling the need

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of stretching his legs, tossed his book aside and walked back to the vestibule. As he reached it there came several short, hoarse blasts from the engine. The vestibule door was still open and Wade leaned out and looked up the track. There was no one in sight, but the engine bell clanged faintly once or twice and then, with a slight jerk the train began to move forward. Wade wondered whether they were really off at last or whether they were merely moving further along the track for some reason. But his doubts were soon dispelled, for the train gathered speed rapidly and in a moment the clean-cut bank of snow beside the track was flowing smoothly by. With a grunt of satisfaction Wade turned his head for a final glimpse of the little settlement behind. What he saw sent his hand upward toward the signal-cord. But as his fingers touched it his hand dropped away again. There was a moment of indecision, and then, poising himself on the lower step, Wade pulled his cap

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down firmly, waited his opportunity and leaped out toward the snowbank.

X

THE first objects to meet his sight when he opened his eyes a moment later were his feet pointing skyward at an angle of about forty-five degrees. He had an indistinct recollection of having turned one complete somersault after striking the bank. Now he was lying on his back with his head and shoulders far below the level and eyes, nose and mouth filled with snow. After a struggle he pulled his body up and his feet down, and then scrambled and slid out of his soft couch and gained the track. Snow had worked down his neck and up his sleeves and into his shoes, and for awhile he was busy shaking himself and stamping and wiping his moist face with his handkerchief, and when he finally looked toward the station platform

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his only reward was a fleeting glimpse of a slim, fur-coated back disappearing into the waiting-room.

"I wonder if she's laughing?" he said to himself. "Anyhow, I did it!"

He walked back along the track to the station, smoothing his disarranged attire and striving to forget that the melting snow was trickling down his back. When he pushed open the door the girl was speaking to the agent through the little window.

"The stupidest thing I ever knew!" she was saying. "That conductor should have told me that the train was leaving. Will you kindly tell me how I am going to get to Quebec now?"

"He did not know, I think, that madame was here," explained the agent, gesticulating excitedly, behind the small opening. "Me, I cannot say how sorry I am for madame. I will telegraph to that conductor and tell him what madame say, that he is one big stupid, one fool, one—Ah!" The sound of the closing door attracted him

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and he saw Wade. "Madame, the train is back! All right now, yes?"

"No, the train isn't back," said Wade. "I left it as it pulled out."

"But monsieur is a friend of madame, yes?" He smiled joyously from Wade to the girl. "She will not have to wait here alone. Tres bien, tres bien!" Wade looked doubtfully at the girl and received the stoniest of glances. But,

"Yes, I am a friend of the lady. When does the next train pass here for Quebec?"

"At eight-forty-seven, monsieur, if on time."

"Eight-forty-seven!" exclaimed Wade.

"Eight-forty-seven!" cried Prue. "But I can't wait all that time! The idea!"

The agent, who was young and impressionable, looked devastated with sorrow.

"Madame, I regret, me, but that is the first train. Madame may be comfortable here and quite warm, and it is to wait only four, five hours, no?"

"Only four or five hours!" sighed Prue.

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"In this—this place!" She glanced disdainfully around at the empty benches and the cracked walls and the white-washed stove. "Well, I suppose if I must wait, I must. Please telegraph to the conductor to tell my party that I am all right and will get to Quebec at—what time, Agent?"

"Nine-thirty, madame. Yes, madame at once, instantly. Have no care; all shall be done." The agent smiled ingratiatingly through the window, but if he hoped to win thanks or commendation he was disappointed for the girl turned away with a shrug of her shoulders and crossed to the stove where she placed one small foot on the rail, turning her damp shoe from side to side and apparently forgetting the presence of both the agent and Wade.

"Tell the conductor to look after my things in Section Five," he instructed the agent. "I suppose he'd better leave them with the agent at Levis and I'll get them when I reach there."

"Certainly, monsieur, certainly. And

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believe me, monsieur, I am sorry, oh, very sorry for so stupid a mistake! Anything I can do, me, I will be so glad; monsieur has only to say."

"Thanks. Just get those messages off, please."

"At once, this moment, monsieur!" The agent disappeared from the window and the instrument began to click. Wade turned and surveyed the uncompromising black fur coat. He discovered that it was going to require a good deal of courage to do what common sense and ordinary courtesy as well as his own desire demanded. He approached the stove.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am, Miss Burnett," he began. "That conductor ought to be tarred-and-feathered."

She looked across at him coldly and distantly for a brief instant. Then, with a slight inclination of her head, she returned to her occupation of drying her shoe.

"Four or five hours here isn't a very cheerful prospect," he went on, "but I

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dare say we're lucky not to have to wait longer."

"Probably," she said uninterestedly.

"It was quite by accident that I looked back and saw you," he continued, gaining courage from the sound of his own voice. "In another moment it would have been too late."

"Too late?" she repeated questioningly, glancing at him. "Too late for what?"

"Why, too late to get off. You see, the train was already making pretty good time and I had to jump between the telegraph poles."

"It was—very heroic of you," she replied with a wealth of sarcasm. Wade colored.

"Well, I didn't mean that," he said ruefully. There was a protracted pause. Then she turned toward him, tilting her head back so that she could see from under the brim of her felt hat. It was a charming pose, he reflected, but a fearsomely haughty one. She was viewing him with something almost approaching interest,

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and when she spoke her voice was almost affable.

"Perhaps," she said, "you'll be good enough to tell me in what way you consider that you have bettered the situation by throwing yourself into a snowdrift?"

"Why—er—you were left here quite alone, Miss Burnett, and it seemed to me that perhaps I might be of service—"

"Really? And it didn't occur to you that the most serviceable thing you could have done would have been to pull the bell-cord?"

Wade flushed, opened his mouth and closed it again.

"I suppose that even on this road the trains are supplied with bell-cords?" she went on in half-smiling irony.

"I think—yes, they are."

"And it didn't occur to you, when you saw that I was being left behind, to pull the cord and stop the train?"

Wade dropped his gaze, swallowed hard and temporized.

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"I'll confess, Miss Burnett, that in the —the confusion of the moment I acted stupidly—"

He paused, perhaps hoping for something in the nature of a contradiction. But Prue was staring indifferently at the stove.

"When I saw you alone here my only thought was to—to—"

"To force your society on me," she finished icily.

Wade bit his lip. She was plainly in a very bad humor and he was in danger of losing his own temper, he found. Discretion indicated retreat.

"If you think that, you are mistaken," he said frigidly. "To prove that I have neither desire nor intention of inflicting my society on you, Miss Burnett, I'll—withdraw." Withdraw wasn't just the word for the occasion, but it was the only one that came to him. Annoyed by the reflection that he had spoken like the hero of a melodrama he turned toward the waiting-room door.

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"One moment, please!" Prue was facing him with a dangerous sparkle in her dark eyes. "You say you had no thought of inflicting your society on me, Mister—Forbes, is it not?" Wade bowed.

"My desire was to be of service to you," he answered.

"And you didn't think of stopping the train?"

Wade hesitated. Then,

"I did," he answered steadily.

"But instead of doing it you—" She finished with a shrug of her slender shoulders. "Why, Mr. Forbes?"

Wade hesitated. The girl smiled disdainfully.

"I suppose you will say that your presence on the train from New York and on the train from Boston was merely accidental, Mr. Forbes?"

"No, it wasn't," he answered. "I don't pretend that it was. I followed you quite deliberately, Miss Burnett."

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"And you call that gentlemanly behavior?" she demanded.

"Have I annoyed you at any time, Miss Burnett?"

"Do you think it is pleasant or agreeable to a girl to be shadowed by a total stranger, Mr. Forbes?"

"I don't think you have any right to use the word 'shadowed.' That suggests spying. I haven't spied on you. I haven't attempted to force my society on you—until now, and that was done thoughtlessly, on the moment's impulse, and I am sorry for it. I own up to having followed you. What else could I do? If I hadn't I'd have lost sight of you completely, Miss Burnett."

"Oh!"

"Besides," he went on, warming to his defence, "the fact that I am a total stranger isn't my fault. I don't want to be a stranger; that's why I followed. I guess it seems rather cheeky to you, Miss Burnett, but if you stop and think about it you'll recog-

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nize the fact that what I've done was the only thing to do."

"How perfectly absurd!" she said impatiently. "What right have you to think that I—want to know you?"

"I don't suppose you do—yet. But I want to know you. Now look here, Miss Burnett; be fair! Wanting to know you isn't a crime, is it? Other chaps have wanted the same thing, and I dare say they've gone about much as I have. If they haven't pursued you from New York to Quebec it is because they haven't had to. But I dare say they've schemed and manoeuvred in the city, sought invitations to the places you went to and begged introductions. Well, I didn't have a chance to do that. While I was trying to find out where you lived, and who you were, you started off on this trip. If I had stayed behind and waited you might not have come back. I could get nothing out of that close-mouthed butler."

She flashed a startled look at him.

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"You went to the house?" she exclaimed.

"Why not?" He shrugged his shoulders.

"What else could I do? You were leaving New York and I had to find out where you were going."

There was a moment's silence. Prue studied the stove frowningly. Then,

"May I inquire, Mr. Forbes, what part of the world you come from?"

"Colorado. Why?"

"Why? Well, it explains your—your absurd conduct in a measure, don't you think?" she replied amusedly.

"Don't see it," he answered. "I'd have done the same thing if I'd lived in—in New Jersey!"

"I'm afraid you're a little bit stupid, Mr. Forbes. I was generously providing you with an excuse."

"I don't want any. If I had seen you, as I did, at the opera the other night and hadn't wanted to know you I might have been grateful for your excuse, Miss Burnett."

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The frown deepened.

"Mr. Forbes," she said sweetly, "you have been very frank with me. Now it is my turn." She paused, smiling across at him. Wade bowed uneasily. "You have given yourself a good deal of trouble so far and it seems rather a shame. Perhaps I ought to feel flattered that you consider me—shall I say attractive?—enough to be worth all this bother; but somehow, I don't." She wrinkled her forehead charmingly and glanced mockingly at him. "Strange, isn't it? And now, to be equally frank, Mr. Forbes, I'm going to tell you something that will save you all further sacrifices of time and comfort. It's simply this; I haven't the slightest desire in the world to make your acquaintance any further, and I sincerely hope that this will be our last meeting. That is both frank and plain, isn't it, Mr. Forbes?"

Wade smiled.

"Absolutely," he replied calmly. Her smile gave place to the little frown again.

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Possibly his total lack of consternation disappointed her.

"Then may I hope that—"

"I will remove my unwelcome presence?" he inquired politely. "You may. I'll go in just a minute. As this is to be our final meeting, Miss Burnett, you won't begrudge me another moment, I'm sure. I merely want to say that as it takes two to make a quarrel so it needs two to effect an eternal separation. You hope that we won't meet again, but I hope that we will—many times."

"Let me remind you," she returned, quite as politely, "that it also takes two to effect a meeting."

"Don't think that I mean to annoy you, Miss Burnett. I wouldn't do that for anything in the world. But you mustn't expect me to give up just because you are angry with me at the moment. When you get to thinking it over calmly you'll see that I haven't done anything very dreadful. And I hope that after awhile you'll be will-

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ing to let me prove that I am not quite the—the bounder you evidently think me now. I'm mighty sorry that I've started wrong, sorry that I've annoyed you when that was the last thing in my mind to do. I plead guilty to selfishness this afternoon, but that is all. I did think of pulling the signal-cord and stopping the train. But the prospect of being able to talk to you and spending a few hours in your company got the better of me. I'm sorry and I beg your pardon. I shall be outside until the train comes. If you should want anything, please let me do for you at least as much as you would allow a stranger to do. I promise you that I will not attempt to presume any further on your—good-nature."

He bowed, turned and went out onto the platform. Prue's gaze followed him until the door had closed. Then she dropped her eyes to the point of the shoe on the railing, staring at it with a puzzled frown. Presently her face cleared, the corners of her mouth went up and there sounded in

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the quiet room a sigh that somehow suggested more of amusement than despair.

XI

IT had been about three o'clock when the train had sped away northward leaving Prue marooned at St. Anselme. And now it was past four by her watch. For an hour she had sat on the bench in a corner of the stuffy little room and stared through the snow-dimmed windows. She had removed her coat and had placed it behind her to soften the angles of the uncompromising bench. She had heard from Aunt Mildred by telegraph, a calmly perturbed "message which advised her of arrangements to meet her in Quebec on her arrival and threatened dire punishment to the railroad company. The conductor had also wired the agent to "look after young lady left at your station and forward her on Number 1, care of conductor." The

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agent had translated the first part of the instructions to mean that he was to supply entertainment, but his well-intentioned efforts to engage Prue in conversation had met with no success, and he had finally retreated again to his compartment. Once unmistakable sounds had sent Prue hastening to the door. But all that had met her gaze was a snow-plow and locomotive which, after sighing and sobbing in front of the station for a few minutes, had disappeared again into the storm.

It was getting dark now, and the agent reappeared and lighted the solitary bracket lamp beside the ticket window. Prue piled her fur coat behind her, rested her head against it and closed her eyes. Perhaps, she thought, she might be able to sleep away part of the remaining four hours. But, to her disappointment, she found that she was not the least bit sleepy, that her eyes wouldn't even remain closed. She wondered what had become of the obnoxious Mr. Forbes. For awhile he had paced

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the platform and she had seen his blurred form pass the snow-splashed windows and heard the sound of his steps on the boards. But that had ceased long since. It was too bad that he had behaved so badly, for he was really quite good-looking, and—and attractive, in spite of his sins. She almost wished she had not quarrelled with him; anyone's society would be preferable to this tiresome isolation. Perhaps, after all, she had been unnecessarily harsh with him; and one shouldn't hold Westerners to the civilized standards of the East. Besides—and her cheeks warmed a little at the reflection—she hadn't been absolutely guiltless herself! She had kept one of his roses that evening in the cab and had deliberately let him see it. And there was the note she had written thanking him for the luncheon, with its flirtatious postscript! That he hadn't taken that as an excuse to annoy her with attentions proved at least that he was a gentleman. In fact, until this afternoon he had really done nothing very much

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out of the way. But to deliberately, maliciously sentence her to five or six hours in this dreary waiting-room—well, that was unforgivable! Even if he had done it—for the reason he said—still it was very wrong of him. And yet, even that sin held the saving grace of courage and audacity. She had witnessed the leap from the moving train, had thrilled with horror at the sight, had stood rooted with anxiety until he had tumbled unscathed from the snowbank and then had unconcernedly turned her back to show him how utterly indifferent she was to his fate! Certainly, she reflected now, it must have taken a good deal of courage to risk neck and limb in that manner, and the fact that he had done it merely because he wanted to—well, to make her acquaintance, was flattering. On the whole, she wasn't sure that even this last and greatest sin might not be forgiven him—in time. What annoyed her now was that the sinner apparently cared not a mite whether he was forgiven or not! It was

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distinctly selfish and unkind of him to leave her here all alone!

The agent closed the ticket-window and presently appeared muffled to the ears in a shaggy bear-skin coat. He locked the office door and mended the fire. He was, he explained, going to his supper. It was customary to close the station while away, but as madame was here he would leave it open. Madame would like supper presently?

"Thank you, no, I am not hungry. I can get something on the train?"

"Of a certainty, if madame desires to wait so long. But the gentleman—madame's husband, perhaps? No? The gentleman would desire supper?"

"I'm sure I don't know," answered Prue indifferently. "He is outside somewhere. You might ask him."

After the agent had gone the place seemed lonelier than ever. The three black windows stared at her gruesomely. When a coal fell in the stove she started in a panic. She looked at her watch. It was ten

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minutes past five. There remained almost four hours longer to wait! The sound of snow-deadened footfalls on the platform sent her heart to beating agitatedly. Supposing one of those awful rough-looking men she had seen on the platform should enter! She would be simply frightened to death! The door opened a little; outside someone stamped heavily; then the door swung wider open and a great red-bearded giant strode in. He wore a green plaid Mackinaw coat, bound at the waist with a red and yellow sash, a woolen cap hid the upper part of his face, and his trousers were tucked into felt-topped lumberman's boots. A roll of blankets was strapped to his back and he carried a canvas bag. He closed the door, stowed his burdens on the bench, and advanced to the stove. In the act of taking off his big mittens he glanced across and saw the huddled figure in the corner. Off came his cap with a sweep and the red beard and mustache parted over a row of big white teeth.

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"Bon jour, madame!"

Prue, with fast-beating heart, managed a murmured response. The giant rubbed his chilled hands together before the stove and beamed amiably about the room. Finally his gaze went back to the girl.

"The snow she come hard," he announced with another flash of white teeth.

"This one ver' bad night, no?"

Prue nodded: It would never do to let him suspect that she was afraid. She measured the distance to the door.

"Madame waits for the train? She is late perhaps?"

"Yes."

"Vraiment! She bad track. She bad road, yes, ver' bad road. Me, I come from Lacbas. Forty-two mile, madame. Ver' bad march."

He unwound his sash and opened his thick coat. Into one pocket after another his long fingers dipped. At last he found what he sought and left the stove and came straight toward Prue. She watched his

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approach with wide, frightened eyes, one hand at her heart. If, she thought, he came near she should scream! What was it he held in his hand? Not a pistol, not a knife; something small; pebbles, they seemed; half a dozen little pebbles. The scream was ready to come, but something in the expression of the big, homely face that smiled down on her held it back. The giant stretched one big hand toward her.

"Madame like the spruce perhaps? Ver' good spruce."

She looked at the little lumps of spruce gum and shook her head dumbly. Then her gaze, passing from the proffered gift to his face, saw a whitish blur at a window. Her hand dropped from her heart and a little laugh of relief escaped her. She held out her two hands and the giant poured the pebbles into the pink bowl of her palms. He laughed with pleasure.

"Aha! Madame like the spruce! All ladies like the spruce. Me, I know how to please the ladies!" He drew back and



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"MADAME LIKE THE SPRUCE, PERHAPS?"

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beamed genially down on her. "You chew her, yes? Put her in the mouth, so. That is it!"

Prue obediently placed one of the pieces between her lips and strove to smile her appreciation. The girl watched delightedly for a moment and then donned his cap and buttoned his jacket.

"Now," he announced, "I go get me my supper. Me, ever hungry but boy." He laughed at his joke, glanced at his bundles, bowed politely to Prue and, with a final display of teeth, went out. She gave a sigh of relief and looked dubiously at the spruce gum.

"It was very silly of me," she thought, "to be frightened. But I didn't know that he was out there." She looked again at the window, but the white blur was gone. She sighed. Then she dropped the spruce gum in a pocket of her coat. And at that moment the door opened again.

This time it was Wade who entered. Inside the door he shook the snow from



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his shoulders and turned down the collar of his jacket.

"I'm afraid," he said apologetically, "that I shall have to trespass, Miss Burnett. This seems to be the only place there is."

"I fancy," she replied very coldly, "you have as much right here as I have." She watched him approach the stove and stretch his bare hands to the warmth. Even across the room and in the dim light she could see how they shook. Suddenly she sat up very straight on the bench.

"Mr. Forbes!"

"Yes?"

"You haven't any overcoat!"

"Not here," he replied, his teeth chattering.

"And you've been out there all this time?"

"Well, there wasn't anywhere else, Miss Burnett. I tried to break into the baggage room but the door was locked."

"I never heard of anything so—so foolish! You've probably caught a terrible cold!" Then indignation gave way to con-

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cern. "Oh, I'm so sorry, really! It was all my fault. But you oughtn't to have paid any attention to what I said. I didn't mean that you were to—to freeze to death, Mr. Forbes!"

"But it's of no consequence, really, Miss Burnett. I was quite warm until a short while ago. And I'm warm again already. No, please!"

For Prue had seized her coat and was coming toward him determinedly.

"You must put this on," she declared. "Just around your shoulders, Mr. Forbes. Oh, but you must, really! If you should catch cold I'd never forgive myself for being so mean and disagreeable."

"You weren't," declared Wade as he drew the coat around his shivering body.

"I was; absolutely hateful. But I'm sorry. There, that's better, isn't it? Didn't you have any gloves, either?"

Wade shook his head smilingly.

"No, you see I—I left hurriedly; had no time to pack."



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"You were very silly. You might have killed yourself."

"No, I had only to land in the snow. It was easy enough." He turned and faced her squarely. "Look here, Miss Burnett, I've been thinking it over out there and I guess you're right about—about the whole thing. I guess I have behaved like a cad all along, and—"

"I never said that," replied Prue hurriedly.

"And jumping off that train was a low-down thing to do. You see, it wouldn't be so bad if I hadn't thought of pulling the signal cord; but I did. I even had my hand on it." He paused and looked anxiously at her face. She was studying the cracked top of the stove.

"I'm—I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Well," she replied with a little laugh, "what's done is done, isn't it? After all, you didn't realize, I suppose—"

"Yes, I did," he said doggedly. "I—I just did it on purpose."

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"But why—No, I don't mean why—"

"I guess you know why," he said. "Because ever since I first saw you there at the opera house—"

"Please, Mr. Forbes!"

"Oh, I suppose this isn't the time nor the place to tell you this," he hurried on, "but I'm going back in the morning and I guess I shan't see you again. So—so I've just got to."

"Going back?" she interrupted. "Why I thought you were on your way to Quebec."

"I was. I was going where you went. But I was acting like an idiot. You see, Miss Burnett, you—you sort of knocked me in a heap. That first moment. After that I never had any other thought than just to find you again and—and keep after you until—" He shook his shoulders impatiently and the fur coat slid to the floor unnoticed. "I've read about love at first sight, but I never believed in it until that night. Then I knew—there was such a thing. Look here, maybe this is all wrong

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too? I've been out there so long I don't know much about the—the rules of the game, Miss Burnett. Maybe I oughtn't to tell you this while you're all alone here. Maybe I'm getting in all wrong again. Am I?"

Prue laughed uncertainly.

"It isn't wrong," she said weakly, "but it's—awfully silly."

"I can stand that. I've acted sort of loco from the start. There were the flowers, and the sandwiches—"

"But the sandwiches saved our lives," she murmured demurely.

"I suppose a chap who knew how to behave in society wouldn't have done those things. But I—seemed as though I had to. It was all off with me the very first second I set my eyes on you. I never knew that women could be so beautiful and—and *fine*. You see, we don't have many of the nice kind out our way, and I've been there so long I'd forgotten about women I used to know. I just felt as though you

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were the girl I'd been living for and working for all my life, and that you must feel it and know it. I thought all I had to do was to stay around and—and be nice to you and some day you'd get to like me. That was silly, wasn't it? And I didn't realize that I was making a cad of myself by following you around the country."

"I never said that," replied Prue softly.

"No, but I guess you thought it."

"No." She shook her head at the stove lid slowly. "No, I never once thought that of you. I did think you were—were—"

"Go on," he said with a harsh laugh. "I can stand it."

"Only that you were—sort of silly and—and impetuous."

"Impetuous! What else could I be? You don't understand. You've never been in love like this, I guess!"

"How do you know that?" she asked quietly.

He recalled Gordon's chatter about Kingdon Smith.

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"I don't," he answered in sudden dejection. "Perhaps you have. If you have you know how I felt. Well, I guess that's all. I felt as though I had to tell you. It was my only excuse for—for annoying you."

"In Colorado," asked Prue without glancing at him, "are the men usually—affected—so suddenly, Mr. Forbes?"

"I don't know. I am."

"Always?" She turned a look of innocent surprise on him.

"You're making fun of me now," he muttered sadly.

"No, I'm not making fun," she replied gravely. "I confess that I'm—smiling, Mr. Forbes. You surely don't want me to—to think you serious," she added lightly.

"You know I am," he said simply.

He was staring morosely at the stove. Prue stole a look at his face, smiled ever so slightly and was silent. After a moment he looked up quickly and broke into impulsive speech.

"Miss Burnett, if things were different—

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circumstances, you know—would it have been any good? I mean, could I have made you care, do you think?"

"Are you serious, Mr. Forbes?"

"Serious! Good Lord, yes! I was never more serious in my life! You don't understand." He frowned perplexedly. "Why, tonight, when you go—on that train—I'll feel like—like a dog that's been kicked out into the street to starve. The bottom of things is just falling out completely. It's as though, since I saw you, I'd been going up and up in a bucket, past one level after another with the blue sky and the real world getting nearer and nearer with every wind of the windlass. And now, just when I was beginning to smell the surface and feel the warmth of the sun, the cable's broke and I'm falling straight for the bottom with nothing ahead but a dull thud. You bet it's serious," he ended grimly.

"Then—then I'm sorry," she said gently. After a pause she added; "That is, if you really must go back."



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"But I—couldn't go on, could I?" he asked hopelessly.

"Why?"

"Because if I did it would mean that I would still hope."

"Oh."

"And after what you've said—"

"I didn't know that I'd said—anything particular," she murmured.

"You said you didn't want to make my acquaintance or see me again."

"Did I? And you said, didn't you? that it took two to—to say good bye."

"Then you didn't mean it?" he cried eagerly. "Not all of it, that is? You'll let me—"

She laughed.

"Mr. Forbes, how do you expect me to know what I meant or didn't mean when I'm starving to death? *Do* you suppose there is anything to eat anywhere?"

"Eat?" he echoed vacantly.

"Yes, is eating quite outside your philosophy? Perhaps it does sound prosaic, but

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I've had nothing since noon but some spruce gum."

Wade rescued her coat from the floor, handed it to her and turned determinedly to the door.

"I'll find something," he said.



XII

IT was nearly twenty minutes later that he returned with a wooden box in his arms.

"There aren't any trays in St. Anselme," he said as he kicked the door shut. "Nor baskets, either. So I got a box. I'm afraid this isn't a very dainty repast, but it seems to be the best the town can afford." He set the box on the floor and displayed the contents. "Coffee, bread and butter, fried venison and stewed fruit."

"Lovely!" she cried.

"Well, wait and see. The coffee doesn't look like any coffee I ever saw outside a mining camp, and I'm afraid the meat is pretty cold by now. I had to bring the stuff about a half-mile."

"What a shame! I dare say you're just frozen again."

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"No, I'm as warm as toast. Speaking of toast, why not have some? Couldn't we toast the bread at the fire?"

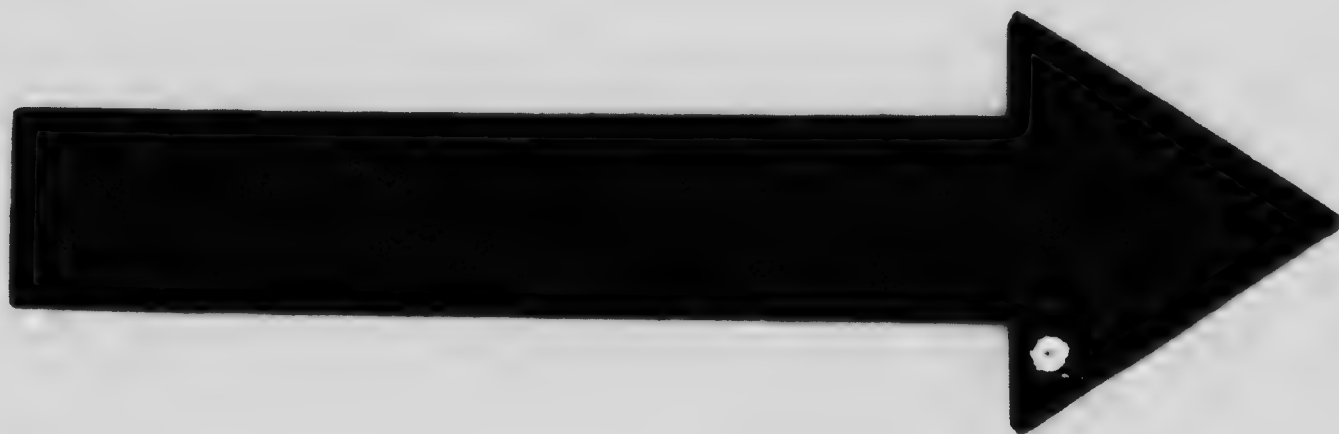
"Of course! Give it to me and let me do it. Is there a fork?"

"Two; good old fashioned forks with three tines and beautiful bone handles. Here you are. Let me open that door for you. I'll put the coffee on top here to keep hot. There aren't any napkins, I'm sorry to say."

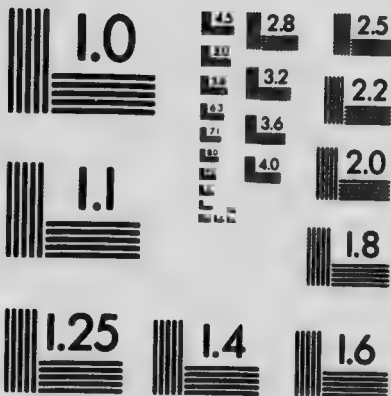
"Who wants them?" she asked merrily. "You can't eat napkins."

Five minutes later they were feasting happily. The box, inverted on the bench between them, made an acceptable if insecure table. The coffee, sipped from clumsy stoneware cups and stirred with tin spoons, was a new experience to them both, but Wade secretly thought that it came nearer to being nectar than anything he had ever tasted. The toast was a huge success, and the venison—

"I'll bet this deer was no spring chicken,"



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said Wade as he struggled with a piece on his plate.

"How absurd you are," answered Prue. "Who ever heard of a deer that *was* a spring chicken? It's perfectly delicious and I was never so hungry in my life."

There were no sauce-plates for the stewed peaches, so they ate them from the bowl with their coffee spoons.

"We ought to have eaten these first as appetizers," said Wade. "There're as sour as vinegar."

"Put some sugar on them," she advised. "I'm going to. I'll have to use my own spoon, though. There isn't any more bread, is there?"

There wasn't, and Wade shook his head disconsolately.

"I ought to have brought more," he said.

"Oh, I've had quite enough. And it was all as nice as could be. You are a wonderful caterer, Mr. Forbes. And now, will you have some spruce gum?" She laughed.

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"No, thanks, but I'm going to smoke if I may."

She nodded and watched him fill his pipe and light it. Then he returned the dishes to the box and shoved it under the bench. Prue looked at her watch.

"Why, it's almost seven!" she exclaimed. "Isn't that nice?"

"Is it?" he asked, his face falling.

"Isn't it? There's only two hours longer to wait. That is, if the train is on time. But I suppose that is too much to hope for."

"Probably," he said.

"When does your train go?" she asked interestedly.

"About eight in the morning."

"What? You don't mean that you are going to stay here all night? Isn't there one before that?"

"Well, yes, there's one along in about thirty minutes, but I'm going to see you off before I leave."

"Oh, but you mustn't! Why, you'd have to stay here for hours and hours!"



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"Yes, and alone. I mean—" he hesitated, then went on desperately, "Oh, it's not the waiting I mind; it's losing you!"

"Poor Mr. Forbes!" she sighed lugubriously.

Wade jumped up and strode to the window and stood a moment staring unseeingly out into the storm. Then he turned, with a shake of his shoulders, and came back to where she sat.

"Oh, I suppose I'm acting like an awful ass," he exclaimed with a wry smile, "and I don't blame you for laughing at me. Perhaps I'd better go outside again for awhile."

"Outside? But why?"

"Oh, because." He sank onto the bench and stared moodily at his interlaced fingers. Ensued a silence broken only by the soft fall of a coal in the stove.

"I suppose it bores you to death," he said finally, "but I just have to talk about it."

"It?" she asked.

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"Yes, about myself—and you. You see, I can't help thinking— it may be conceited and all that— but somehow it seems to me that if I had only come around sooner I might have stood a chance. Even then circumstances would have been against me, I guess, but—"

"Please, what are the mysterious circumstances, Mr. Forbes? You mentioned them before, didn't you?"

"I mean—I was thinking of your wealth."

"My—what?" she exclaimed.

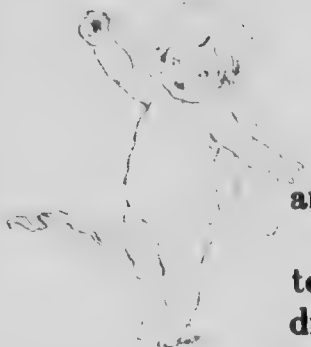
"Your wealth. Your brother told me."

"Oh! Gordon told you about my wealth? Would you mind telling me just what he said, Mr. Forbes?"

"Why, only that you and he had a couple of millions each. I didn't intend to pump him, Miss Burnett, and—"

"Don't apologize. I dare say he didn't require much encouragement. Gordon is very—communicative. Also very imaginative."

Wade looked at her hopefully.



CUPID EN ROUTE

"Imaginative? You mean that you aren't that wealthy?"

"Exactly. Gordon and I have enough to live on and that's about all. Aunt Mildred is putting him through school. I don't think he means to tell lies, exactly, but—but he romances."

"Then you're not rich!" Wade exclaimed.

"Not at all rich, Mr. Forbes."

"By Jove! That—that's great!"

"Well, really, I'm afraid I can't share your enthusiasm," she laughed. "Is it such a fortunate thing to be near-poor?"

"Yes—no—Look here, there was another thing he told me—" He stopped suddenly.

"Yes? You'd better tell me, for it was probably as imaginative as the story about the two millions."

"Well, please don't think me cheeky, but is there a chap named Smith?"

"I should say," responded Prue demurely, "that there might be several chaps of that name."

"But—Kingdon Smith?"

CUPID EN ROUTE

"Yes, there is. He is a friend. Just what did Gordon tell you about Mr. Smith?"

"He said that he thought that if you married anyone it would be Kingdon Smith, but that it wasn't definitely decided yet."

"It isn't," said Prue.

"Well—" But Wade reconsidered the remark. Instead, "I suppose he has plenty of money?" he asked. Prue nodded.

"I think so. Does his financial condition interest you?"

"Not especially," was the glum response.

"Because if it does," continued Prue, shooting a lightning glance from under her lashes, "Mr. Smith will be in Quebec in a day or two, and, if you cared to, you might stay over and confer with him personally."

"If I did stay I'd be more likely to throw him into the river," growled Wade.

"Poor Mr. Smith!" she laughed. "He would be so—so astounded at the treatment!"

"You say it isn't settled yet?"

"What?"

CUPID EN ROUTE

"That you're to marry him?"

"No, it isn't settled—yet."

"I suppose he's going to ask you for—
for your answer when he comes?"

"Don't you think that perhaps you're a
little bit— How shall I say it politely,
Mr. Forbes?—a little bit inquisitorial?"

"Cheeky, I suppose you mean," he
muttered. "Perhaps I am, but I've got
to risk that. What I—"

"I believe you're rather fond of risks,"
she said thoughtfully.

"A man will risk anything if the prize is
big enough. Look here, I wish you'd do
something."

"Well?"

"Give me a chance. Hold that chap off
for a week. You don't dislike me now, do
you?"

"Dislike you? N-no. On the contrary,
Mr. Forbes, I think you decidedly interest-
ing and—breezy."

"You mean that I amuse you?"

"Something of the sort, I suppose."

CUPID EN ROUTE

"Well, that will do for a start. You *don't* dislike me; that's something. Give me a week and let me see if I can't make as good a showing as Smith. Will you?"

"You're absolutely absurd!" she laughed. "I haven't said that I intended marrying Mr. Smith."

"You shan't if I can prevent it," he answered grimly. "Will you give me my chance?"

"A whole week?" she asked mockingly. "I don't think you do yourself justice. I'm sure you don't really believe you need all that time."

He flushed.

"That means that you think me conceited. Well, perhaps I am. At least, I think I'm as good a man as Kingdon Smith." He turned with a new expression on his face. The frowns were gone and he smiled confidently. "He can't love you more than I do; no man could; certainly no man by the name of Smith. He may have more money than I have at present, but in ten years

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I'll be able to buy him and sell him. Not that I'm a beggar now; my partner and I divided a hundred and four thousand this year in profits. Perhaps he's better looking, more—polished, can talk better. But he can't do any more for you nor make you any happier than I can. If he's of good family, so am I. The Forbeses are one of the oldest families in New York state. He can't have anything on me there."

The girl's smiles were gone and she was gazing at him in a sort of wondering fascination, the color deepening each moment in her cheeks.

"I won't ask for a week, Miss Burnett. As you say, it's too long. I don't need it to win out from Smith." He looked at his watch. "It's seven twenty now. Give me until your train goes. That's all I'll ask. Will you give me that?"

XIII

THERE was a little silence. Prue's gaze wavered and fell. Finally, "I never heard—" she began falteringly, and stopped.

"Of all the absurd—" she began again.

"Absurd, if you like," he said calmly.

"Do I get it?"

She raised her eyes and studied his face a moment, their glances meeting and challenging in the dim light. Then a little smile crept around her lips.

"That, I suppose," she said lightly, "is what you'd call a sporting proposition, Mr. Forbes?"

"You said I liked risks. I'm taking one."

"Then you propose," she asked with a return of the old mockery, "to make a

CUPID EN ROUTE

complete conquest of my—my affections in something like two hours, Mr. Forbes?"

"Nearer an hour and a half, I'd say, Miss Burnett. No, I say nothing about making a complete conquest; perhaps I shall only succeed in losing what little ground I have; but it's a fighting chance and I'll take it. What do you say? Call it a sporting proposition, if you like; call it rank lunacy."

"And what—am I supposed to agree to? What am I to do?"

"Nothing except forget that you have known me only a day; give me the same standing as Smith; let me start even with him. Will you?"

"It sounds amusing," she said carelessly, "but—"

"You're not afraid?" he challenged.

"Afraid? Not the least bit, Mr. Forbes." She laughed softly and settled back in the corner. "Pray begin."

"Thanks." Wade gave a sigh, took a knee in his hands and faced her smilingly. "Whether I win or lose, Miss Burnett,

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you've been generous. You see, I grant the possibility of defeat."

"That's modest," she murmured.

"Meaning that it isn't. Well, perhaps modesty isn't one of the things they teach out our way. Modesty, in fact, doesn't do a chap much good when he's hustling for things in our country. It's the chap who elbows his way through and reaches out and grabs what he's after that makes the hit. I've done that; had to. Usually I've got what I wanted. When I told Dave— Dave is my partner, and the best old rough diamond that ever lived. When I told him that I had seen the woman I wanted, and had set my mind on getting her, Dave was a little inclined to be pessimistic at first. 'You can't come here and pick out a gal and just marry her out of hand,' said Dave. Then I asked him why not, and he didn't seem to know. After he'd thought it over a while he concluded it wasn't so unreasonable after all. 'I don't say you won't do it,' he said. 'I don't recollect ever seeing

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you go after a thing and not get it.' And that's encouraging, anyhow."

"Now you're trying to intimidate me," she said, affecting alarm.

"No, I wasn't, really," he laughed. "Besides, there's a saying that all signs fail in dry weather."

She shook her head. "I fear that's beyond me, Mr. Forbes."

"It is rather obscure, I'll confess. But I understand that saying to mean that as long as it doesn't much matter, you can tell what the weather is going to be from a study of the signs, but when there's a long drought and it means a lot to have rain, the usual indications can't be depended on. Perhaps it's so in my case. The fact that I've usually obtained what I wanted when my wants weren't vastly important, doesn't signify that I won't fail now that I'm after what really counts. Rather involved, isn't it?"

"A little," she agreed. "Tell me about this Dave. You say he is your partner? And you are interested in mining?"

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"We own a mine together, Miss Burnett, the Better Days, at Lone Mesa, Colorado. We found it at a time when we were both about as hard up as we could be and the name explains what we hoped for. And we weren't disappointed. The Better Days is one of the best little producers in the state and we haven't much more than scratched the surface yet. It was hard work for a while, though. Winter shut down on us before we'd got much done and we had to worry through it without knowing for certain whether we'd really struck a good lode or merely a pocket. There were times that winter—" He stopped with a shake of his head.

"Tell me," she said interestedly. "How did you happen to find it? Did you just stumble on it the way they do in stories?"

"Not a bit of it! We prospected for almost three months before we found that claim. We'd been down in the southwest. Our grub gave out and we had to get back. We struck Telluride dead-broke and lay

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around there for a week trying to get someone to grub-stake us. Finally we did manage to get another start. But we couldn't go very far on what we had and so we decided to look about nearby. You remember the old story of the man who traveled around the world looking for a four-leafed clover or something and then came back empty-handed only to find what he sought at his own door-step? It was that way with us. Lone Mesa is only a short distance from Telluride. There were a few claims being worked there when we reached it, but no one was getting rich. We looked the place over and began to scratch around and inside of a week we hit on our claim. We filed and I went to Denver and bullied a man there into lending us enough money to develop. It was late by that time, though, and the snows came, and we had to wait for spring. But in the spring we found that we were to be repaid for waiting. Now we're shipping three or four cars a day to the mills."

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"But it is just like a story, after all, Mr. Forbes. And this Dave, it was he who was with you that evening at the opera? A great big man with a voice like—like a fog-horn?"

"That was Dave. He had never been East in his life and I persuaded him to come and see the country. He had a wonderful time, Miss Burnett, and it was a lot of fun for me, you may be sure. He's a devoted admirer of yours, by the way. He said you were a 'peach!' "

Prue laughed. "He must have found lots of things to interest him," she said. "I'd like to have met him. He was lovely the night he pushed that man away from me in front of the opera house. For a moment I was quite as scared of him as I was of the other; until I saw his face."

"He's one of the best men the Lord ever made," said Wade earnestly. "But he *was* funny in New York. Let me tell you about how he bought a red dress for his wife."

So Wade recounted their adventures in

CUPID EN ROUTE

search of the flamingo gown, and Prue found it vastly amusing. He followed that with other incidents of Dave's stay in the metropolis, and then harked back to the West and told of his first meeting with Dave. And when he stopped Prue sighed.

"It must be wonderful to be a man," she said thoughtfully. "He has so many things happen to him."

"Not all pleasant, though," said Wade smilingly.

"What does that matter? They're—they're *things*, they're adventures! Women just exist; their days are all alike; nothing ever really happens to them."

"Is today like all your other days?" asked Wade.

"No, that's true," she laughed. "I'm really having an adventure! I've been kidnapped and held captive by—by a very desperate character who—" She paused and went on gravely; "Do you know, Mr. Forbes, I'd quite forgotten that you were—were—"

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"So had I," answered Wade truthfully. "And—" looking at his watch—"I've wasted a half-hour!" He laughed ruefully. "I shall have to make up for lost time, Miss Burnett. By the way, I dare say Smith calls you by your first name?"

"Sometimes," she replied gravely.

"And you call him—Kingdon?"

"Just King."

"Then, Prue—"

"I beg your pardon!" exclaimed the girl startledly.

"I called you Prue," he said calmly. "I was to have the same privileges as Smith, wasn't I?"

"Oh! . . . But—"

"Does he kiss you?"

"No!" This resentfully and explosively.

"I'm glad of that," mused Wade. "Not but what—"

He didn't finish, but the color crept into Prue's cheeks.

"Tell me," he said, "what it is about me that you don't like."



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"That I don't like?" she faltered.

"Yes," he answered encouragingly.

"Where in your judgment do I fall short as—as a future husband?"

"Why—why, I don't know you, Mr. Forbes."

"Wade, please," he said gently.

"I shan't!" she cried with crimsoning face.

"Well—we'll waive that for the moment. Is that all? It's only that you don't know me?"

"Of course that isn't all! I don't—care for you."

"You mean you don't love me?" She nodded.

"Do you think you could, Prue?"

"You've no right to ask such a question," she replied indignantly.

"Yes, I have a right to ask it. And you have a right to refuse to answer it," he said untroubledly.

"Then I use my right," she said a little hysterically.



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"Still, you see, don't you, that neither of the reasons you have advanced are—adequate?"

"I see nothing of the sort."

"But look!" He tapped one palm with his pipe as though to lend emphasis. "The first objection is easily remedied. I'm not hard to know. That merely takes a little time; say a week or ten days. The second objection—well, I don't say positively that that can be remedied, but I think it might. Do you?"

"I—I haven't considered it."

"Well, won't you, please? You see, it makes a lot of difference to me, Prue."

"You have no right to call me Prue!"

"You're forgetting our compact."

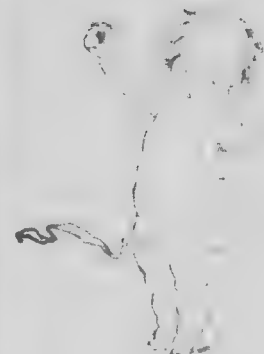
"Well, you needn't—do it so much, then."

"I'll try not to. You decline to consider it, then?"

"I do."

"That's unwise. For all you know I may be just the chap for you. I think you





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ought to give the matter thought. Don't you?"

"I think you're acting very silly and talking a great deal of nonsense," said Prue severely.

"Well, unless there were some doubt in my favor you wouldn't need to consider that question; you'd know without thinking about it. So I shall conclude that if you knew me better you might learn to care for me."

"I never said such a thing, Mr. Forbes!"

"No, the conclusion is mine."

"It's a wrong conclusion, then!"

"I hope not."

"Mr. Forbes, you are making me very angry."

"I'm sorry. Still, I'd rather have you angry with me than totally indifferent."

"But I am indifferent!"

"Then you're not angry. And I'm glad of that, for I'm not nearly through yet."

Prue sighed exasperatedly and folded her



F. FOSTER LINCOLN

"PRUE SIGHED EXASPERATEDLY — ASSUMING
AN EXPRESSION OF BORED
PATIENCE"

CUPID EN ROUTE

hands in her lap assuming an expression of bored patience.

"Go on," she said. "If you have any more absurd things to say, please say them and get through."

"They're not absurd," he answered gently. "Prue, I love you with all my heart and soul, dear, and I want you to marry me. Wait, please! I know the whole thing looks—funny, but try to forget that a minute. Just consider that here's a man who saw you by accident one evening and fell in love with you. He's not a bad sort of a chap. I mean that he isn't worse than the average man; has tried to live straight and clean. There's nothing against him on the score of birth and breeding, although his parlor tricks haven't been developed much. He has money enough to give you what you want and he will have a lot more. And he loves you—girl, you don't know how much! Now, dear, is it so absurd, after all?"

"I—I don't know what to say," murmured Prue, returning his look with a brief

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glance at once anxious and perplexed. "It's all ~~so—so—~~*strange!*"

"Say 'yes,' " he answered boldly.

"But—but I can't!"

"Why?"

"Why, because—because I *can't*, I *mustn't!* I mean—"

"Never mind what you can't do or mustn't do! *Will* you?"

He leaned toward her and rested one hand lightly on her folded ones. They moved restively, but, finding they were not to be imprisoned, made no effort to escape.

"*Will* you, Prue?" he urged pleadingly, softly. She tried to raise her eyes, tried to bring back the scoffing smile to her lips, but a panic held her. For the first time in such a situation she was afraid! Not of the man before her, not of herself, but of some power outside of them both that seemed to be drugging her into a state of resistlessness, a resistlessness that was the more perturbing because so strangely sweet!

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His hand pressed more closely on hers, and, "You won't?" he asked.

The tone of doubt broke for an instant the spell that held her. She shook her head.

There was silence for a moment. She wanted to get up and run away, but as long as his hand lay there on hers she felt powerless to move. At last it slipped away slowly and she drew a sigh of relief. Her courage came back to her and she raised her eyes. He was not looking at her now, but sat leaning forward, elbows on knees, hands loosely clasped in an attitude of dejection, his frowning gaze fixed on the floor.

"You are sure?" he asked in a low voice.

She hesitated. Was she sure? The world seemed suddenly to have grown topsy-turvy and nothing was certain any more. But,

"Yes," she said quite distinctly.

He sat for a moment longer in silence. Then he threw back his shoulders and drew

CUPID EN ROUTE

out his watch. She experienced a qualm of irritation that he could think of time at such a moment. The door opened and the agent entered. He smiled and bowed and went into his room. As he opened the door the click of the telegraph instrument came to them. Wade dropped his watch back into his pocket and looked at her with a grave smile.

"Well, I lose," he said. Their glances held a moment, hers curious, anxious, his searching, doubting. Then he arose.

"Excuse me a moment," he said, and went to the ticket window which had just been pushed up. Prue watched him as he stood there talking to the agent. Somehow, his defeat brought her no sense of triumph. She wondered why.

"The train for Sherbrooke seems to be late," said Wade.

"Yes, monsieur, I have just had news of her. She is leaving Levis more than an hour late. Undoubtedly the ferry causes the delay."

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"And the other train, the one to Quebec?"

"On time, monsieur, absolutely on time, to the minute."

"Which will reach here first, do you think?"

"The train for the north. She has the right of way. She will pass the other at the next station above."

"Good," said Wade. He glanced at the clock. "Then she will be here in twenty minutes?"

"In twenty minutes, monsieur. I hope the lady has been comfortable, yes?"

"Quite, I believe. Let me have a ticket to Sherbrooke, please."

"At once, monsieur, this instant."

"I'm going to be able to catch the seventy-three from Quebec, after all, I find," he said when he returned to her. "It is leaving Levis over an hour late; trouble with the ferry, the agent thinks. So your train, which is right on time, will get here first and I can see you on board. I'm glad not to have to spend the night here."



CUPID EN ROUTE

"Yes," she answered vaguely.

There seemed little to say after that. The giant with the red beard returned and smiled upon them broadly.

"The snow she stop," he announced cheerfully. "She get cold now."

Prue arose and walked to a window. Already the stars were peeping through the clouded sky.

"Couldn't we go out for a few minutes before the train comes?" she asked. "I'd like to get a breath of air. Will you be too cold?"

"Not a bit," he answered.

They went out on to the platform and found a sheltered corner. A little wind was blowing the clouds away fast, and between them the sky was blue-black and scintillant with frosty-white stars.

"This is Christmas Eve," he said.

"Why, yes," she replied. "I'd forgotten."

"I hope you'll have a very merry Christmas."

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"And I hope you will, Mr. Forbes."

"Thank you." He smiled grimly in contemplation of it.

"You will get home in time for—for what? Dinner?"

"I'm afraid not," he said. "You see, I won't be able to get out of Sherbrooke until tomorrow evening. I guess my Christmas dinner will be eaten at the hotel. However, I shall do well enough. I wish though, that I'd thought to ask them to send my bag and coat down on that seven-thirty."

"Is it too late now?" she asked anxiously.

"I'm afraid so. It doesn't matter. I dare say I can buy some sort of a coat at Sherbrooke."

She was silent a minute. Then,

"I hate to think of you spending your Christmas there," she said troubledly. "I feel as though—I were to blame, you see."

"Not at all," he said cheerfully. "And I dare say I'll quite enjoy it. There must be something to see there; perhaps they've got a South African Monument."

CUPID EN ROUTE

"Just the same, I wish you were coming to Quebec."

"You wish—" He turned and tried to make out her face in the starlight.

From a distance came the whistle of the north-bound train.

"You'd be comfortable there," she went on hurriedly. "And I don't see—why my being in the same town need—annoy you."

"Annoy me!"

"Well—trouble you."

"It would, though. No, I've made enough of a nuisance of myself, Miss Burnett. About the only thing I can do to retrieve myself is to make my exit as gracefully as I can."

"But, don't you see, you're spoiling my holiday too? I feel as though I were depriving you of your visit to Quebec, Mr. Forbes."

"Why shouldn't you? You were the cause of my going. Why shouldn't you be the cause of my turning back? No, you mustn't feel that way about it. Quebec

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means no more to me than any other place, except that it will hold you. And now—" He stopped.

The train whistled again and they heard the throbbing of it on the rails.

"But—if I ask you to come?"

The sound of the approaching train filled her with dismay.

"If you ask me to come," he said tensely, "it must be for just one reason."

There was a break in the little laugh she essayed.

"Oh, I don't care," she whispered recklessly. "Call it any reason you like. Only—please come!"

A light glimmered along the rails.

"Prue!" he whispered. He groped for her hands and found them awaiting him.

"Is it true, dear?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" she answered between laughter and tears. "Don't you see it is? You thought you were the only one that—cared—from the first. But you weren't. I cared too, from the first time."



CUPID EN ROUTE

"Prue!"

"Yes, I did. You might as well know I And I kept caring more. But I didn't know it—really, I didn't—until just now in there. You see, you did win, after all!"

His arms went around her and she lifted her face frankly to his in the darkness. The words he murmured were lost in the roar of the train. A yellow radiance enfolded them and she drew back with a little gasp of dismay and caught the engineer's smile as he swept by, leaning from the window of the cab.

"All aboard for Quebec!"

On the way to the parlor car they met the giant, swinging under his load, seeking the day coach.

"She ver' good train," he called with merry smile. "She on time, madame! Bon soir! Bon soir, m'sieur!"

"Seats seven and eight, sir," said the conductor. "All right here!"

The train started. The conductor closed the vestibule doors and shot an interested

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"HIS ARMS WENT AROUND HER"

CUPID EN ROUTE

glance at the two passengers who lingered on the platform ere he disappeared into the coach. The little station with its one dim light slipped away.

"I almost hate to leave it," whispered Prue.

"And I," he answered.

"It's a dear little place," she sighed happily. "St. Anselme. Do you know what Anselme means, sir?"

"It means happiness to me, Sweetheart."

"It means the protection of God. Doesn't that seem like a good omen—Wade?"

"Yes, dear," he answered devoutly.

Presently she drew away from him and smoothed her hair under the absurd felt hat, laughing softly.

"Now," she said, "we must get ready to face Auntie!"

"And I," he said, "must write a telegram."

"A telegram?"

"To Dave."

"Oh! And what are you going to say?"



CUPID EN ROUTE

"I'm going to say: 'Look for water pitcher. Address, Chateau Frontenac, Quebec. Merry Christmas. Wade and Prue.'

r water
ac, Que-
Prue.'"

